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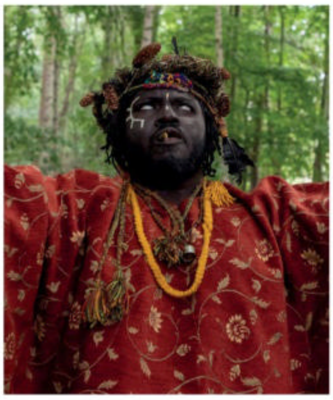
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In July, heavy metal's Prince of Darkness got a right royal send-off in his hometown of Birmingham. **BRETT TAYLOR** traces the story of Black Sabbath's occult dabblings, from Tony Iommi's astral travels to Ozzy Osbourne's Satanic panics...

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In 1997, Channel 4 viewers were treated to a television version of *Fortean Times* in which Rev Lionel Fanthorpe presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". After the show's success, Father Lionel was back with a second helping of Fortean TV in 1998. Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he concludes his series rewatch...

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

LEFT: Tracy Mikich with a life-size statue of Sandown Sam at the town's arts and community space Boojum&Snark

COURTESY BOOJUM&SNARK

GHOSTS, WITCHES & SANDOWN SAM

Autumn is upon us, and with Hallowe'en imminent we bring you a seasonably spooky issue, full of witches, ghosts and – even more terrifying to some – Morris dancers.

Our beautiful cover photo records the work of Herefordshire's Dark Morris side Blackthorn Ritualistic Folk, who have built up a reputation for bringing Britain's folklore to life with their unique performances celebrating key points in the ritual year. FT's Lisa Gledhill has been off the beaten track in deepest Herefordshire to see them in action and brings us her report in this issue (p.28).

As we prepare to unleash our next FT special edition – *Witches and Witchcraft*, on sale 9 October – Rebecca Batley gets us firmly in the mood with her survey of one county's impressive tally of ghostly witches: Essex appears to be haunted by many a victim of Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins, and also boasts plentiful witch-lore of a more recent vintage (p.34).

We had to mark the passing of heavy metal's 'Prince of Darkness', but as Brett Taylor demonstrates, it wasn't just the late Ozzy Osbourne who came face to face with the Devil and all his works: the remaining members of Black Sabbath have all had their run-ins with the unexplained (p.38).

And one of the weirdest cases in the annals of British ufology – which might not be where it truly belongs – has been back in the news: Sam the Sandown Clown, the focus of a high strangeness 1970s encounter reported by a young girl known only as 'Fay', has emerged from the shadows. New accounts have been put forward suggesting that Sam revisited the Isle of Wight – and original witness Fay – on a number of occasions; not all the locals we spoke to are convinced, but as Tracy Mikic, of Sandown's Boojum&Snark, and artist Teresa Grimaldi told us, Sam has certainly been getting a lot of interest in the community; could we be seeing a Sandown Sam festival in the future, the Island's answer to other successful entities like Mothman or Nessie? Watch this space.

Elsewhere, we focus on the weirder side of television: Ryan Shirlow concludes his survey of *Fortean TV's* second series, Tim Weinberg considers *Midsomer Murders*' debt to folk horror, and Kate Cherrell remembers the time Bernard Manning MC'd his own funeral. We hope you enjoy the issue – and Happy Hallowe'en!

LOST LANDS: A PERFECT PROJECT FOR... SOMEONE?

Our Founding Editor Bob Rickard writes: "Over the years I have accumulated books and papers – about a boxful – with the idea of doing a book on this topic. Because of the demands of my current projects, I don't have the time or energy to start a new one. I would be happy for them to go to any FT reader who has an abiding interest in this subject and would make good use of them. If this appeals to you, please send me a note at bobrickard@mail.com about your enthusiasm for 'lost lands' ('real' or 'supposed'). I will choose one from among the responses but – a big caveat – the winner will have to arrange for collection from my London address or pay for delivery."

FT LETTERS EMAIL UPDATE

Paul Sieveking's usual email address is now working once again, so please send all correspondence for the letters pages to: sieveking@forteantimes.com.

ForteanTimes
The Haunted Land

COVER PHOTOGRAPH WWW.INSTAGRAM.COM/FOLK.RIGHT.OFF

OZZY OSBOURNE: MEDIAPUNCH INC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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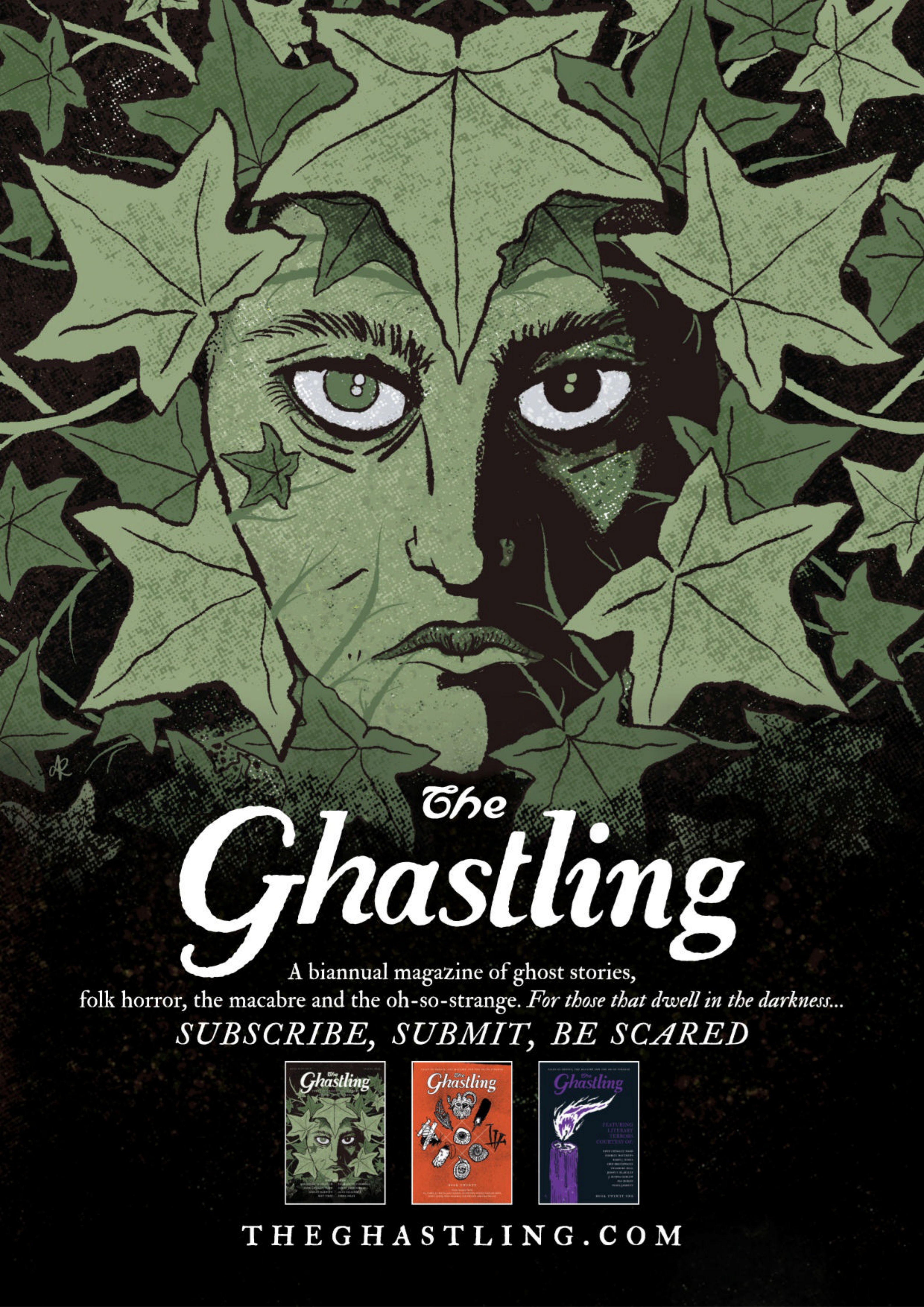

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folk horror, the macabre and the oh-so-strange. *For those that dwell in the darkness...*

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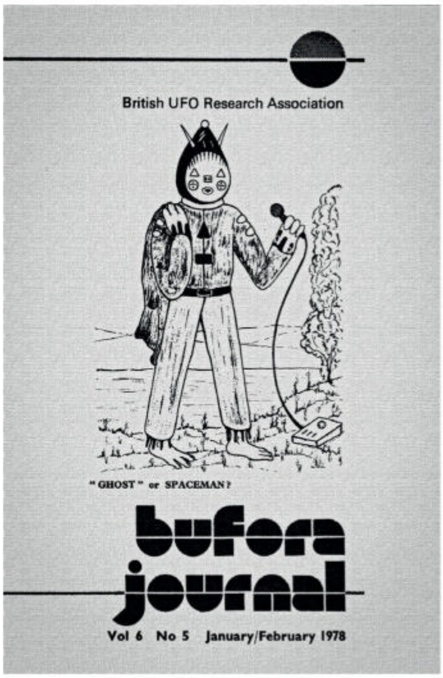
A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

SANDOWN SAM RETURNS

The Isle of Wight's legendary ghost clown is back in the news

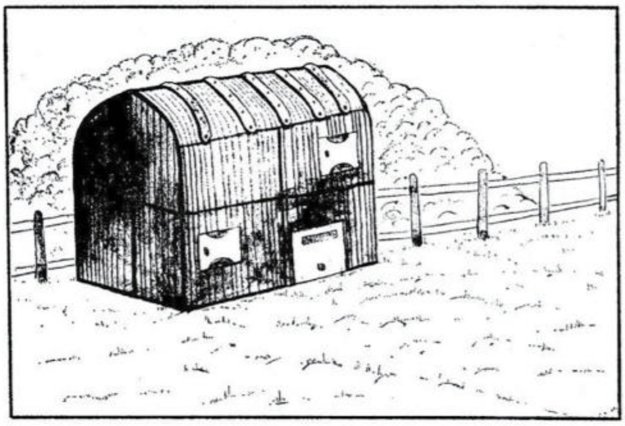


British UFO Research Association

"GHOST" or SPACEMAN?

bufora journal

Vol 6 No 5 January/February 1978



LEFT: The Sandown "Ghost" on the cover of *Bufura Journal* in 1978. **ABOVE**: A sketch of the strange metal hut in which Sam talked to the two child witnesses as it appeared in the BUFORA report.

In the annals of high strangeness forteana, few cases are quite as strange as that of Sandown Sam. On a Tuesday afternoon in May 1973, a seven-year-old girl (given the pseudonym "Fay" in the BUFORA report) and an unnamed boy were walking on Lake Common near Sandown on the Isle of Wight and encountered an extraordinary entity: humanoid, about seven feet tall, with triangular markings for eyes, a brown square for a nose and unmoving yellow lips on a stark white face. His arms and legs were described as "like wooden slats", and he was wearing multicoloured clothes, with a pointy yellow hat that had a knob on top and wooden antennæ on the sides: his appearance led to him being dubbed "The Sandown Clown".

He sometimes spoke through a device, but mainly used a paper notepad to communicate with the children, and at one point accidentally dropped this in a brook. The entity introduced himself to "Fay" using the pad to say "Hello, I am all colours, Sam." When asked if he was a man, he replied, "No"; but when asked if he was a ghost, explained, "Well, not really, but I am in an odd sort of way." Pressed as to what he really was, he just replied, "You know." He then invited the children into a strange metal hut, where he talked to them for half an hour and did an odd trick with berries, before sending them on their way. His clothes seemed somewhat ragged and he gave the children the understanding that he was stranded here in some way and that he had to forage for food.

> *He mainly used a paper notepad to communicate with the children*

It was long believed to be an utterly unique encounter, but Isle of Wight writer Paul AT Wilson says he has discovered that there was considerably more to the story than previously thought after making contact with someone he believes to be "Fay" herself. Appearing on the podcasts *Binnall of America* and *Modern Fairy Sightings*, he outlined his discoveries.

It seems that while over the years he has come across four people who claimed to be "Fay" on the Isle of Wight, this one, who reached out to him via a relative, was able to back up her claim. When they met, Wilson says, she produced a large archive of documentary evidence, including voluminous correspondence between her father (who had reported a number of UFO experiences) and BUFORA, the unedited transcript of the children's original retelling of their experience, and, intriguingly, Sam's actual notebook, which he had given to the girl.

"Fay" still wishes to remain anonymous, not allowing Wilson to photograph her, and while she allowed her story to be recorded, she would not let Wilson make the actual recordings public, only transcripts. However, she allowed him to copy all the documents apart from Sam's notebook, which still shows water damage and contains about 10 pages of his writing which, Wilson says, doesn't match the handwriting of any of the humans involved in the event and its aftermath. The material in the archive adds details of the encounter that were edited out of the original report, adding more description of the "hut": that it was bigger inside than out, rather like a TARDIS, and had strange rubbery wallpaper that made the children's arm hair stand on end as if from a static charge, and that Sam talked about there being others of his kind and how they could be identified by their different hats.

"Fay" also told Wilson that she'd actually met Sam, whom she referred to throughout as "the Sandown Ghost", several more times, and that she'd recorded these meetings in her diary. Her second Sam experience took place in 1982, just under 10 years after the first, at about the same time of year. Fay was 16 and had a Saturday job at some stables, which she travelled to on the bus. On the day in question, Fay finished work in the late afternoon and had started the 10-minute walk to the bus stop. She was on a path through an area of scrub when she heard "a thin melodic note, metallic, high, and oddly playful" and then Sam stepped into view, much the same as before, but no longer looking tattered. He was carrying "a small whistle covered in buttons", which, when

PILOT ON SHROOMS
And other tales of unfortunate aviation
PAGE 17

WELSH WEIRDNESS
Ghosts and alien spacecraft in the valleys
PAGE 18

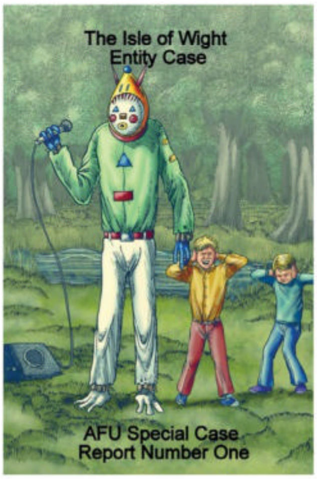
AIR-DRIED CHAPLAIN
Kept corpses and mysterous mummies
PAGE 24

COURTESY ONTHEWIGHT.COM

ABOVE: Isle of Wight writer and folklorist Paul AT Wison gives a talk on Sandown Sam in the atmospheric setting of Bembridge Fort. **BELOW**: A full-colour Sam as he appears on the cover of the AFU/Flying Disk Press publication *The Isle of Wight Entity Case*.

he pressed them, made a buzzing and caused the air in front of her to shimmer. In the shimmer appeared "chalk drawings" and Sam said, "I've been keeping an eye out for you. I'm very happy we made friends." Fay was slightly startled by all this, but not afraid. Sam continued, "Things are fixed now. I don't have to hide or forage," and when Fay asked him to elaborate, he produced another image from the "whistle", which Fay describes as "resembling a doorway or a gate", but it faded too quickly for her to be able to see it clearly. She then said "Look, I've got to go. I've got to go catch my bus," and Sam told her, "I'll see you again four more times if you want. Travel safely," and disappeared back into the wood with an odd, hopping motion.

The next encounter was a year later; Fay was hanging out in a park with other teenagers when she suddenly smelled earth and burnt leaves, and instantly she "isn't there anymore". She was still sitting on the bench and still in the park but "the park was different, everything, colours, shadows, silence was more intense. It felt like reality had been turned upside down", Fay said, and "the Ghost was there", meaning Sam. This time, though, there are others like him, but difficult to focus on. "Some wore clothing like his," she said, "odd patchwork garments stitched with unplaceable fabrics." Others shimmered slightly like "like heat off a warm road". They spoke, she said, not in English, or even words exactly, but like voices heard through water. Fay described it as "a language without meaning, but with presence". Around them she could see freestanding doorways, some open, some closed; one led to somewhere green, another showed stars, and one shimmered "like mercury". Fay said it was "like standing in a cathedral." Sam spoke, saying, "I'm glad you're here. You are doing well," and led her past the doorways, showing her things; she couldn't remember the details, but said that some felt joyous and some sad.


The Isle of Wight Entity Case
AFU Special Case Report Number One

A view Fay did remember showed the Earth from far above, distant, glowing and blue, and she could see "Europe whole without borders, without barbed wire". At this point Sam said, "The world will not end in your lifetime; there will be no nuclear war and Europe will not be split for long." He then said, "This is the second time. I told you there will be four more if you wish it," and Fay asked him "Why me?" But Sam just nodded and she was instantly back in the park with her friends. Startled, she asked, "How long was I gone?" but they just laughed and said, "You haven't gone anywhere. You just been sitting like a weirdo."

Continued on p.6.

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

TELETUBBIE STABBED AT PARTY

(Sydney) Sunday Telegraph, 2 July 2023.

Ruined castle renovation plans held up by newts

BBC News, 5 July 2023.

BOTTOM FALLS OUT OF BOWEL TESTING

(Queensland) Courier-Mail, 16 June 2023.

Texas cheerleader, 17, is charged with animal cruelty for 'poisoning her rival's show goat'

D.Mail, 29 Dec 2024.

SURGERY FOR WOUNDED DRAGONS

(Sydney) Saturday Telegraph, 25 May 2024.

Portal to New York switched off again

Irish Times, 15 May 2024.

SIDELINES

ASKING FOR IT

An hour after Alton Towers theme park debuted *Toxicator,* its new toxic waste themed ride, it had to close it again when a burst pipe flooded the queuing area with raw sewage. Signage promising "toxic waste" and an "overhead splash hazard" caused a social media poster to say: "Bit too literal on the 'toxic substance'". It reopened after an hour following a lightning clean-up by staff. *theguardian.co.uk, 16 Mar 2025.*

"I ATEN'T DEAD"

Before a game against Levski Sofia, players for Bulgarian football team Arda Kardzhali held a minute's silence on the pitch to mark the death of 78-year-old former player Petko Ganchev. This was news to Ganchev, who was out running an errand at the time, leading him to say "When I heard the terrible news, I poured myself a small brandy." Once it was realised he was alive, Ganchev was deluged with calls from the media, leading him to say: "Being buried alive is quite stressful, really." *theguardian.co.uk, 18 Mar 2025.*

TAKING GHOSTS TO TASK

Online odd jobs marketplace Airtasker reports that the number of people using it to seek the services of exorcists and other "ghostbusters" increased by more than 60 per cent between 2023 and 2024, with users offering up to £200 for the services of paranormal investigators to rid their homes of disruptive phantoms. Mia Combs from London needed someone to stop her shelves "flying off the walls", while Caron C from Balham turned to the service to stop "strange noises from inside my walls" after rat poison had no effect. *D.Star, 31 Mar 2024.*

SCARE TASKER
OOOOOOH!

MARTIN ROSS

SANDOWN CLOWN INVESTIGATIONS
OUTSIDER
DREAM
ALIEN
CLOWN
PRANK
GHOST
TRUTH
Sandown spaceman or Golf-links ghost?
SEEKERS
CONTEXT
CONTEMPORARY
TIMELIN
LOCATIONS
CHURCH CP
HAVE YOU SEEN SAM?
GHOSTS of the Isle of Wight
Look-in
SHOULD WE FIND OUT THE TRUTH?

BOOJUMANDSNARK.CO.UK

Continued from p.5.

The third time Sam returned to the island was in 1984, but this was unlike the other encounters. Fay was on the way to visit her boyfriend in Newport, and rather than take her usual shortcut, something made her go the long way. Almost immediately, she was surprised by Sam walking round the corner, looking very peculiar. He was slightly stooped, dressed in clothes more like a human's than previously, and he didn't have the same white complexion. He looked altogether more human, and had mannerisms and speech patterns like a normal person. He said, "I don't have much time. I'm using up one of my visits," adding, "I know where you're going" in an urgent tone of voice. "To see the boy, you shouldn't. Turn around. Just go home. That's all. Please go home." Then he vanished back round the corner, leaving Fay feeling slightly stunned. Nonetheless, she complied, and later found out that the boyfriend was arrested for burglary at about the time she would have arrived at his house, and she would have been caught up in it.

The fourth, and so far final, visit from Sam was in 1989, when Fay was 24. She had just got married and was about to move to the mainland with her husband. The night before they left, she went for a walk and was passing a dried-up fishpond when she spotted an odd hut, which looked out of place. She described this as "resembling an intercity express train", long, white and sleek, but with a slightly bowed roof covered in corrugated iron. Then, she said "the Ghost" stepped out of it, restored to his usual form with the white face and colourful clothes, and invited her in for tea. The "hut" was quiet inside, and illuminated by an unseen light source. There was a table, two chairs, a strange device like a kettle, but not exactly a kettle, and cups made of something like porcelain, but soft and slightly flexible. Sam poured the tea, which smelt of herbs and tasted sweet and comforting. They spoke, but the content of the conversation faded from memory almost as soon as she left the hut. It was "like waking up from a vivid dream and losing it between breaths," Fay said, although she recalled Sam saying "the Berlin wall will fall", which she remembered thinking was impossible. Sam then said, "This is the last time you'll see me until the end." Fay asked him where he was from and he said, "I'm from this place but different." She finished the tea and left, turned and waved goodbye, and walked on, and when she turned again, the hut was gone.

> *"I don't have much time. I'm using up one of my visits"*

This is an extraordinary addition to a fascinating case, and while it does have a feeling of truth about it, as the later encounters seem just too peculiar to be complete fabrications, there are problems. Without Fay's real identity being made public, access to the original recordings or Sam's notebook, we have to take Wilson's word for it that these exist, that he was told this story, and that he has reported it correctly. While it is unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble of faking the archive material Wilson claims to have seen, it is entirely possible for someone to have come into possession of this material without either being Fay or having had the later experiences. Wilson has no history of hoaxing, but without independent verification of Fay's existence and identity it is not possible to draw any conclusions about her, or Wilson's, reliability. It is entirely understandable why Fay might put restrictions on Wilson, but it does place him in the unfortunate position of being the sole gatekeeper of the story; meaning he just has to be trusted to be telling the truth, without independent verification being possible. As a result, it is necessary to suspend judgement on the reality or otherwise of these claims until the evidence can be independently verified. It would, though, be interesting to hear from the boy who shared the original experience, to see if he, too, has met Sam again. Fay told Wilson she had lost touch with him shortly after the 1973 encounter, but he ought to be traceable. *The Modern Fairy Sightings Podcast: Sandown Clown 'Fay' Comes Forward!, 24 Jul 2025; Binnall of America: The Revival: Episode 85, 13 Aug 2025.*

THE EVIDENCE
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KEY FIGURES
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UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

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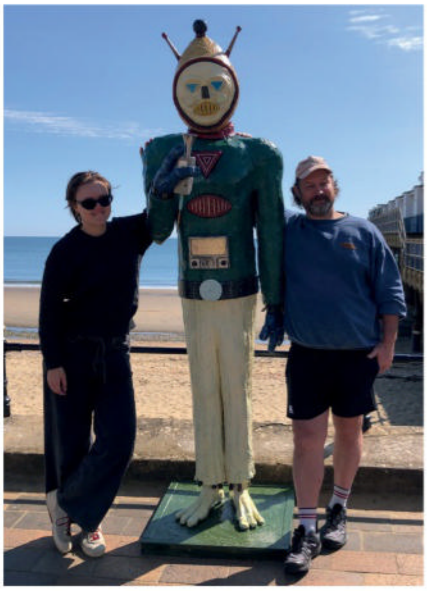
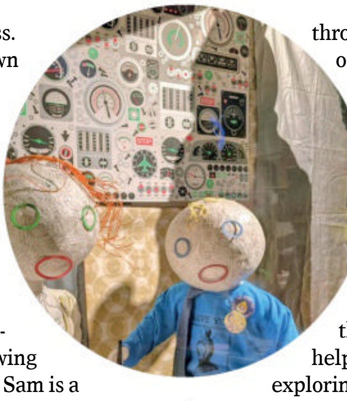




BOOJUMANDSNARK.CO.UK

SUMMER OF SANDOWN SAM

The story of Sandown Sam has been enjoying a revival in the local area that goes beyond Paul AT Wilson's updated accounts of the weird ghost/spaceman. Goldsmiths design lecturer David Jones felt that Sam needed to be "actualised in Sandown in some way" and created a life size (7ft-tall) statue of Sam that he has donated to the Isle of Wight. Statue Sam visited the seafront and Sandown Airport (close to the location of the original sighting) before coming to rest (for now) at Boojum&Snark, a regenerative arts space on Sandown High Street.

Here, artist Teresa Grimaldi and creative producer Tracy Mikich have led a series of community activities to re-engage the public with this tale of high strangeness. "Although known widely around the world, the Sandown Clown sighting remains surprisingly unfamiliar in its hometown," says Tracy, who believes that exploring the growing folklore around Sam is a perfect way to bring Sandown's tale of high strangeness back into the community. Teresa co-created a large puppet of the seven-foot clown with the public, which then appeared in the Sandown Carnival. An installation, 'Windowless Hut', was also featured, inspired by the strange metal hut from the original sighting. Viewable only through a peephole, it offered a glimpse into Sam's world. The project also included a public event called 'The Evidence Board', which framed the sighting as a cold case and invited the community to help solve the mystery, exploring possibilities ranging from a ghost or alien to Ringo Starr (it's complicated, but relates to the shooting of the film *That'll Be the Day* on the Isle of Wight in 1972).

"My money is still on Ringo," Teresa told FT.

With thanks to Tracy Mikich (www.boojumandsnark.co.uk) and Simon Perry (https://onthewight.com/)

SANDOWN SAM STATUE PHOTOS: COURTESY ONTHEWIGHT.COM

TOP LEFT: 'The Evidence Board' at Boojum&Snark invited members of the community to get involved in solving Sandown's very own high strangeness cold case. **TOP RIGHT**: David Jones, a Lecturer of Design at Goldsmiths University, London, and his colleague Natalia with David's life-size statue of Sam. **CENTRE**: A view through the peephole into Teresa Grimaldi's 'Windowless Hut'. **ABOVE**: The Sam statue on the promenade in Sandown in September 2024.

SIDELINES

DEATH IS SWEET

Before his death, Paul Broome, from Bognor Regis in Sussex, had joked about being buried in a coffin based on the wrapper of his favourite chocolate bar, Snickers, and went on to include the wish in his will. When he died, his family honoured the wish, and he went to the grave in a Snickers-themed coffin emblazoned with the phrase "I'm nuts!" in the style of the bar's logo, which his family described as "a perfect tribute to Paul's playful nature". *theargus.co.uk, 19 Mar 2025.*

PLANE STUPID

A United Airlines flight from Los Angeles to Shanghai had to turn round mid-flight and return to San Francisco after it was discovered that the pilot had left a crucial item behind – his passport. The airline apologised for the "unexpected travel disruption" and arranged for a replacement crew to continue the flight, which eventually arrived six hours behind schedule. *wpde.com, 25 Mar 2025.*

OUT-OF-PLACE FOOD

Residents of Reading, Berkshire, were put out to find an octopus and a fish draped over the railings of the city centre King George V Memorial Gardens in Eldon Square. The creatures were reported to police, who could throw no light on how they ended up there. Meanwhile, in Galway, Ireland, it was reported that "a multi-agency taskforce is being formed to deal with the issue of porridge oats being spread across Galway city centre over the past eight years." *BBC News, 28 March; advertiser.ie, 15 May 2025.*

ELEMENTARY…

Emmanuel Lidden, 24, from Sydney, Australia, was shocked to find himself arrested in a massive security operation involving Australian Border Force officials, firefighters, police, and paramedics. A self-confessed "science nerd", Lidden had set himself the goal of collecting all the elements in the periodic table, including the radioactive ones, and had ordered a tiny sample of plutonium from a US website, which technically breached nuclear non-proliferation laws. He faced a 10-year prison sentence, but left court with a two-year good behaviour bond after the judge accepted he did not have malicious intent. *chemistryworld.com, 11 Apr 2025.*

SIDELINES...

BAD VIBES

"Vibe coding' is a method that allows people with limited coding knowledge to make programmes supported by AI. Entrepreneur Tom Blomfield used this to create his *RecipeNinja* app that enabled cooks to use AI to generate bespoke recipes. Unfortunately, the shortcut led to unexpected, although perhaps not surprising, shortcomings. The app cheerfully produced recipes for "Cyanide Ice Cream" and "Thick White Cum Soup", among other inappropriate offerings. The first required a quarter teaspoon of potassium cyanide powder to be added to an ice cream base, while the second instructed cooks to "Mix 1 cup of fresh cum with 4 cups of chicken broth". *404media.co, 2 Apr 2025.*

WRONG FOOTED

An unemployed man in British Columbia, Canada, ended up being denied spousal support during an acrimonious divorce as a result of his obsession with Bigfoot. The judge ruled that the 57-year-old's ability to organise frequent expeditions to seek the elusive manimal meant that he was perfectly capable of holding down a job, so denied him any alimony. *D.Mirror, 1 Feb 2025.*

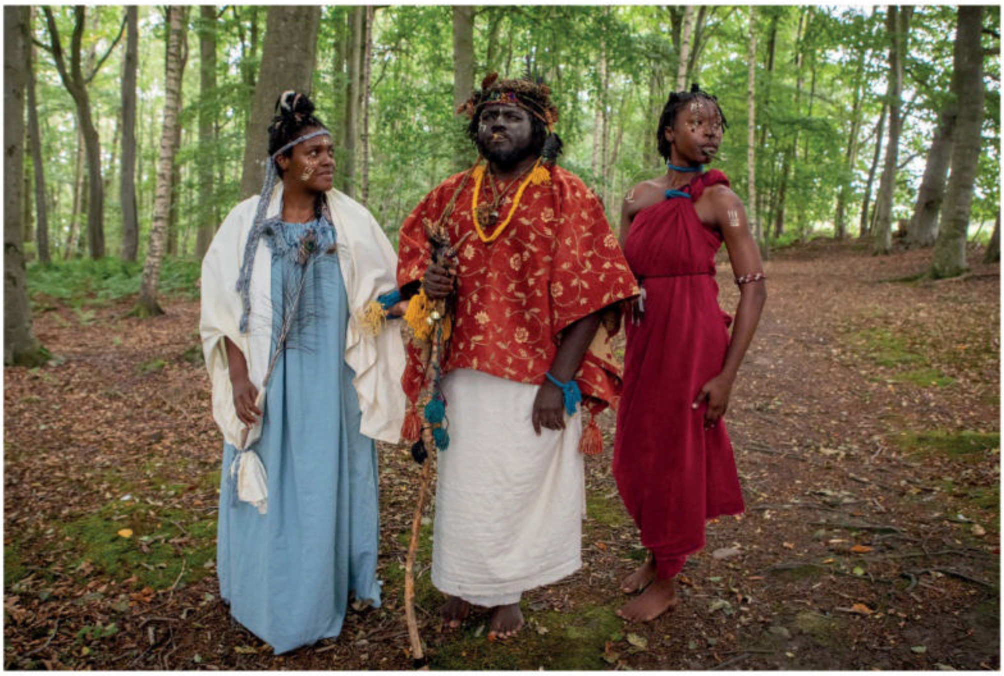
UNARMED ROBBERY

Two men held up a gas station in Denmark, Tennessee, armed with pythons. "They were just waving them around and putting them on the counter," said Mayur Raval, who was working at the gas station, adding, "The snake is a weapon, you know." After intimidating Raval and other staff with the reptiles, the two men grabbed $400 worth of CBD oil from the counter and made off in a small car. Last year, Reginald Cook, 26, tried the same trick on a Memphis gas station and ended up in court charged with attempted aggravated robbery. *woodtv.com, 13 Mar 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

HALLUCI-NATIONS

Starting up your own country isn't always an easy process...



PHOTOS: KATIELEE ARROWSMITH / SWNS

ABOVE: King Atehehe (centre), his queen Nandi (left) and handmaiden Asnat (right) founded the 'kingdom of Kubala' in woods near Jedburgh, Roxburghshire. **BELOW**: King Atehehe, also known as Kofi Offeh. **BOTTOM**: An offering of Irn Bru and Shortbread (from a journalist) is presented to the King by Asnat, 21-year-old Kaura Taylor from Texas.

ZION IN SCOTLAND

Three people who have declared themselves to be a "lost African tribe" have set up home in woodlands near Jedburgh in the Scottish Borders, proclaimed it to be the "kingdom of Kubala", and changed their names to King Atehehe, Queen Nandi, and handmaiden Asnat, Lady Safi. King Atehehe claims to be a descendant of the biblical King David and maintains that the kingdom of Zion was not in the Middle East, but in Scotland, and claims the land in the name of Kubala, which he believes is its rightful successor.

King Atehehe, Queen Nandi, and handmaiden Asnat, Lady Safi, were previously Kofi Offeh, 36, from Ghana, Jean Gasho, 43, a mother of seven from Zimbabwe and Kaura Taylor, 21, from Texas. While the King and Queen have been in Scotland since 2023, Taylor joined the kingdom in May this year, having discovered them online. She had told her family that she was going out "to explore a little", then travelled to the UK to become Lady Safi. Taylor has been reported missing by her relatives, prompting her to send

DANIEL JACKSON

LEFT & BELOW: Twenty-year-old Daniel Jackson has been attempting to establish his new nation of Verdis between Croatia and Serbia.

a video message from the woodland "kingdom" saying: "To the UK authorities, obviously I am not missing. Leave me alone. I'm an adult, not a helpless child." However, Taylor's mother claims her daughter was radicalised online and has been "brainwashed" by by the couple.

The royals are regular posters on social media, accessed via the free wi-fi in the local Co-op supermarket. On her Facebook page Queen Nandi has a video showing King Atehehe sitting on his throne while she fans him with a peacock feather. As she does so, she proclaims, "All hail the King of the North, all hail the Messiah... the Holy seed of David. You are the chosen one. The one to usher us to the Promised Land, here in the holy land of Scotland," and he replies, "The time has come to bring the captives home, the time has come for black power in Kubala." In another video she explains, "If you do not live in a tabernacle today, if this is alien to you... then you are not called, and you're not going to make it into the new world we're right now literally stepping into. The old world has gone. It's now all about eating pasta in the wilderness, Kubala, Kubala." Queen Nandi also claims that Buckingham Palace ordered her arrest for child cruelty in 2023 to protect King Charles's coronation; the couple were charged and remanded in custody in 2024, although the case was subsequently dropped.

The local council did not seem overly pleased about the new kingdom being established on their doorstep, saying that they have "been working with Police Scotland in relation to the ongoing situation. This has included the provision of advice and information about housing options and other support services." Some locals seemed more accepting, with one saying, "They do seem nice, but we don't know much about their culture." However, escalating tensions saw the royals being pelted with stones before an eviction notice was served on them in early September. *dailymail.co.uk, 25 Aug; thescottishsun.co.uk, 8 Sept 2025.*

> *"It's now about eating pasta in the wilderness, Kubala, Kubala"*

VIVA LAS VERDIS

Another attempt to claim land and establish a new nation was made by 20-year-old Daniel Jackson, the self-proclaimed President of the Free Republic of Verdis. He has been working on establishing his new country on a small strip of uninhabited forest between Croatia and Serbia, of which he claims to be the rightful owner and ruler. Officially known as "Pocket 3", the land is a strip of forest about the size of the Vatican, left outside both country's borders at the end of the Croatian war of independence in 1995 and claimed by neither Croatia or Serbia, nor anyone else. "Verdis was an idea when I was about 14, but it came back, and we actually properly created the state after I had turned 18," said Jackson. "We want to be a neutral state. We want to be a hub for NGOs. We have a massive humanitarian background," he explained. "We have the opportunity to test, for example, new systems of governance. We can allow citizens to have a bit of a fresh start. So, people coming from all over the world that want to try something new basically."

Not everyone has a positive view of the venture. "In October 2023 we started a settlement, and a few days later Croatian authorities quickly destroyed that settlement," said Jackson. The venture earned him a permanent ban from entering Croatia, with a three-month ban for his fellow settlers, and the Croatians have now blocked access to the strip. However, this has not put Jackson off. "I've been to Verdis a lot of times before Croatian authorities invaded. We did a lot of cadastral [surveying] work, We planted a flag for the first time earlier that year," he says. He continues to plan the country's future from his "exile" in Dover, Kent, where he works from a desk flanked by flags of his country. Verdis offers virtual citizenship via its website; 15,000 people have applied so far, with 400 already receiving physical passports and IDs, and, Jackson says, Verdisian documents have been used successfully to cross borders. Verdis has a cryptocurrency economy, but has yet to be officially recognised by any country beyond other micronations. In the meantime, Jackson says, "While I am the President of Verdis, I still also live like any other 20-year-old, hanging out with friends and playing video games." *nbcnews.com, 30 Aug 2025.*

SIDELINES...

STUCK STACK

When Mark Lucas parked his business van in the stacked car park in London's Rathbone Square in December 2022, he was expecting to retrieve it later that day. These car parks use mechanical platforms and lifts to stack parked vehicles to save space, and when Mark returned, he was told that a "malfunction" meant they could not extract his vehicle. Despite assurances that the van would be returned "soon", it was still there two years later while the car park awaited the crucial part needed to fix the stack. He finally got his van back on 15 March 2025, with Lucas describing the delay as "frustrating". *BBC News, 8 Apr 2025.*

CRANE CLIMBER

People passing a building site in Luyang, Malaysia, were alarmed to see a man walking along a crane's beam 126m (413ft) off the ground. Emergency services spent 30 minutes persuading him to come down, which he eventually did unaided. Once on the ground, the man, who was in his 40s and worked at the site, was found to be unharmed. He explained that he had been unaware of his actions and had been shocked to find himself high on the crane having "sleepwalked" there, guided by a mysterious "whispering" voice. He was, however, detained by police for further investigation. *scmp.com, 7 Apr 2025.*

TRAVELLING TRIBUTE

When storm Darragh hit Wales on 5 December last year, it swept a memorial bench commemorating William Batcock, who died in 2018, off the promenade at Amlwch in Anglesey and out to sea. Batcock's family were unaware of this until his daughter Helen Wharton was contacted on Facebook by Megan O'Gorman who had found the remains of the bench washed up 75 miles away, on the beach at Drigg in Cumbria. Wharton retrieved the wreckage, which she is turning into a garden feature, while Anglesey council are replacing the seafront bench. *<i>, 18 Feb 2025.*

LUCK SQUARED

Walking past a convenience store in Banner Elk, North Carolina, Jerry Hicks found a $20 bill lying on the ground. On a whim, he went into the store and spent it on an Extreme Cash scratchcard, which won him $1million. *D.Mirror, 2 Nov 2024.*

SIDELINES...

ONE BANANA, TWO BANANA

Kate Wright, 49, from Kendal in Cumbria, was surprised to find that one of the bananas her husband had bought in Morrisons supermarket was much fatter than all the others. On peeling it, she discovered that it was actually a double banana, with two separate bananas enclosed within a single skin. “It was a completely freakish thing,” said Wright. About five per cent of bananas are double, but most get weeded out before they get to the supermarket. *D.Mail, 8 Feb 2025.*

COPTER CROPPER

Brothers Ishwar and Parmeshwar Deen, from Akbarpur Kotwali in northern India, came up with an imaginative money making scheme. They took an old Maruti Suzuki Wagon R and transformed it into a “helicopter” by adding a tail made of sheet steel to the rear and “rotors” to the roof, hoping to rent it out for weddings.

However, when they decided to drive it across town to have it sprayed, it attracted a lot of attention; passers-by “were amazed”, but police took a different view and confiscated the vehicle as “dangerous”, only handing it back when the brothers agreed never to drive it on the road again. *express.co.uk, 24 Mar 2024.*

UNBEATABLE SQUIRREL

Frustrated at being unable to catch whoever was responsible for repeatedly stealing bulbs from the garden lights outside her home in Leeming Bar, North Yorkshire, Sophie Del Gaudio O’Brien, 37, set up a camera to catch the thief. What it captured was a squirrel, determinedly making off with the bulbs in its mouth. “He must be decorating his little den with them,” said O’Brien. “There’s 25 in a set and so far he’s taken a whole set.” *<i> 21 Mar 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

DON’T PANIC!

Shrinking penises, mysterious illnesses at the doctors and phantom hazardous materials

PENISES IN PERIL

For several months in mid-2024 the village of Brindamatilla in Tripura, India, was gripped by koro, a social panic causing men to believe their genitals are shrinking or retracting into their bodies, or are about to (see **FT390:52-53**). This can lead to extreme behaviour intended to prevent retraction, such as gripping the penis with tongs, or attaching it to a leg with safety pins. As with African penis theft panics, this belief persists even when it is clear that no actual harm has occurred to sufferers’ genitals.

LEFT: Local officials visit the village of Tripura to investigate the continuing koro panic.

In Brindamatilla, villagers spent more than three months living in fear of koro, with men claiming that their penises were shrinking and women their breasts, in both cases allegedly accompanied by severe pain. Villagers claimed that two people had died from genital retraction, and blamed the affliction on black magic, with the result that students ceased attending the local school for fear of sorcery. To deal with the problem, the village consulted a tantric magician from Assam, who claimed to have identified the culprits, resulting in two families being driven out of the village; one family was reported to have entirely disappeared, while the other was living a precarious existence, having sought shelter with a local Bengali family, but still experiencing threats and harassment. Government officials visited the village “to try and make them understand this was superstition”, and blamed the outbreak on “opportunistic individuals claiming to be healers” who demanded livestock and valuables from the villagers to solve the problem, but it is unclear whether this ended the outbreak. There have been repeated outbreaks of koro in Tripura, most notably in 2010, when a massive panic took place across West Bengal, Maharashtra, Assam, and Kerala, as well. *tripuratimes.com, 31 Jul 2024.*

HEALTH HAZARDS

Caister Medical Centre in Caister-on-Sea, Norfolk, closed on 29 April after 16 people reported “feeling slightly unwell” on the premises (surely not unexpected at a doctor’s surgery?) The East of England Ambulance Service sent its hazardous area response team (HART) to the site and several people were taken to hospital as a precautionary measure, but were swiftly discharged.

“We have had no linked reports from patients and it is believed there is no wider risk to the public,” said a health centre spokesperson. Engineers from the gas supplier Cadent said that “there were no gas readings, and no carbon monoxide alarms had been activated,” while Anglian Water reported “Our teams checked our pumping station and the surrounding area with a gas monitor, which detected zero”, and the local sewage works also reported no unusual readings, so the centre reopened the next day. However, a week later there was another wave of reported “illness” due to “changes in air quality” at the Medical Centre and emergency services were called again. They evacuated the building and cordoned it off as a “precautionary measure” while the utility providers returned to check once again for gas. This time parts of the centre remained closed for several days while investigations took place, but these again came up blank, suggesting the incidents were probably social panics rather than gas leaks. *BBC News, 29 Apr, 6 May 2025.*

HEATHROW HYSTERIA

On 8 September, Heathrow Airport’s Terminal 4 was closed for three-and-a-half hours due to a “possible hazardous materials incident” after some 20 people “reported an injury”. The Metropolitan Police said in a statement that after investigation by a hazmat team “no trace of any adverse substance was found” and that paramedics found that none of those reporting injuries were suffering from anything serious, concluding that the incident was a “mass hysteria” type event.

On 23 December last year, travellers on a British Airways flight to Egypt ended up being diverted to Venice airport as a result of a similar incident. The plane had to make an unscheduled landing because of a wave of illness sweeping through the passengers. Melanie Wells, 61, described starting to “feel unwell” shortly after setting off from Gatwick, something she initially attributed to an overheated cabin, but soon others reported feeling vague, undefined symptoms, including members of the cabin crew. This led, Wells said, to staff going into “full panic mode” and rushing up and down the aisle while more and more people reported feeling ill. “We were told nothing the whole time,” Wells said. “We landed and the whole plane was surrounded by police, ambulances, fire services.” The plane was then stormed by a team in hazmat suits with full breathing apparatus who started pointing “devices” at affected passengers and crew. “I was absolutely terrified. I was out of my mind with worry. I was really fearful. It was pandemonium,” Wells continued. However, nothing out of the ordinary was discovered and the affected passengers swiftly recovered on leaving the plane. After an overnight stay in Venice, they continued to Egypt on a different aircraft without further incident. British Airways reported that no fumes had been detected on the plane, and that after being checked by engineers it was cleared to return to service the next day. *dailymail.co.uk, 29 Aug; BBC News, 8 Sept 2025.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

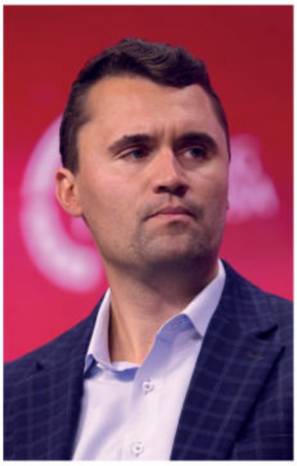
The murder of Charlie Kirk is the latest grim spectacle to be streamed around our politically fractured world and has all the ingredients of a classic conspiracy theory says **NOEL ROONEY**.

ONLINE OMENS

A complex and divisive political figure, a lone gunman with a grievance; these are the classic ingredients for an American conspiracy theory. The murder of Charlie Kirk, a Republican activist, at an event in Utah Valley University, was immediately understood by many as a symbolic moment, a gruesome reiteration of a tragic trope. The fact that it was streamed live only added to the sense that this was a big deal.

The shooting was called out as a false flag by the time Kirk was pronounced dead. The shooter, clearly seen on video, crossing a nearby rooftop and escaping the scene, could not have been the shooter. The shot was too difficult for some amateur with a borrowed rifle. The trail he left was too obvious. The more real and immediate things seem, the less real they are. The looking-glass world of American politics became, for a moment, all too visceral and live.

The elements of doubt, which become the conspiracy narrative, are by now weirdly standard. The shot required an expert; ergo the suspect is a patsy. The gun discovered in woodland after the shooting was right for the shot, but it cannot be dismantled easily (to facilitate an escape, say); ergo it is a plant and the suspect is a patsy. People identifying as experts are all over this theme.


GAGE SKIDMORE

A mysterious flight from a nearby airfield coincided with the killing

A mysterious flight from a nearby airfield coincided with the killing. A private jet took off some 12 minutes after the shooting, from an airfield a mere four minutes' drive from the campus. In flight, it switched off its transponder for a while. It returned to the airfield an hour later. Ergo, the real shooter escaped by jet while the patsy stumbled off a 14-foot high roof and limped into the woods to reassemble the rifle and leave it where it would easily be found.

Some members of the security detail protecting Kirk can be seen, in the video of the murder (which has apparently become a sickeningly popular meme), making gestures that could be interpreted as signals to an assassin: all clear. Ergo this was a planned false flag carried out by the deep state or other bad actors. And here, we strike a vexed issue that some commentators believe explains Kirk's murder.

Charlie Kirk was a fully committed supporter of Israel; but recently he appeared to be distancing himself from Israel's actions in Gaza. Critics of Israel's incursion had appeared on his show. There were rumours (some of those rumours picked up by investigative journalists as well as conspiracists) that he was afraid of blowback; he genuinely believed he was in danger.

Israel is pivotal to understanding the deep divisions on the US right and in the C-sphere. The default orthodox position on the Christian right is unwavering support; but this is quite often clouded by other forms of anti-Semitism. The heretical position (a position gaining increasing traction) is anti-Zionist, occasionally accompanied by pro-Jewish statements to make it clear the speaker is not anti-Semitic. In the Conspirasphere, the heretics appear to be the majority, but both points of view are visible. And in the Sphere, anti-Zionists are cheerfully anti-Semitic; it may not be a benign position, but it is consistent.

So the people crying 'false flag' are pointing the finger of suspicion directly at Israel. They aver that Kirk was funded by the Jewish lobby and his paymasters turned against him. The jet is owned by one Derek Maxfield, who has (hardly surprisingly) denied that it was involved in the shooting. Some are claiming that Maxfield was involved in funding pro-Israel groups. No factual evidence has turned up to support this view.

Factual evidence is a scarce commodity in general these days, sadly. A few well-known critics of Kirk (some of whom displayed a level of vitriolic schadenfreude that ought to shock us all) have taken to posting inaccurate quotes from Kirk's speeches to prove his bad character (which implies he deserved to die?). Given that some of his actual quotes are distinctly partisan, and controversial, this tactic seems unnecessary as well as mendacious and cruel.

Five years of American political life and madness might be symbolised by three events: a man dies on the street while a police officer kneels on his neck; a young woman is fatally stabbed in the throat on a subway train while the other passengers look on and do nothing (except upload images of the tragedy online); a political influencer is shot in the throat as retribution for the things he said, or perhaps for changing his mind. All three horrible deaths become public spectacles, all three victims become martyrs; their final moments repeated endlessly for an audience so jaded by online sensation that they have contrived to bring snuff movies into the mainstream.

It is as if some arcane and powerful dealer in omens is working to separate the American body politic, to shear the head from the body. Or perhaps they are reminding the American people that the separation has already occurred, and now they are paying the blood price for it. That might explain why two of the victims, George Floyd and Charlie Kirk, are beatified or demonised in equal measure, depending on who is talking about them.

And then there is Iryna Zarutska, a Ukrainian refugee. Her murder was at first ignored by the media, until commentators decided to make capital out of it; then she became a political football. I doubt her scurrilous posthumous celebrity is of much comfort to her family.

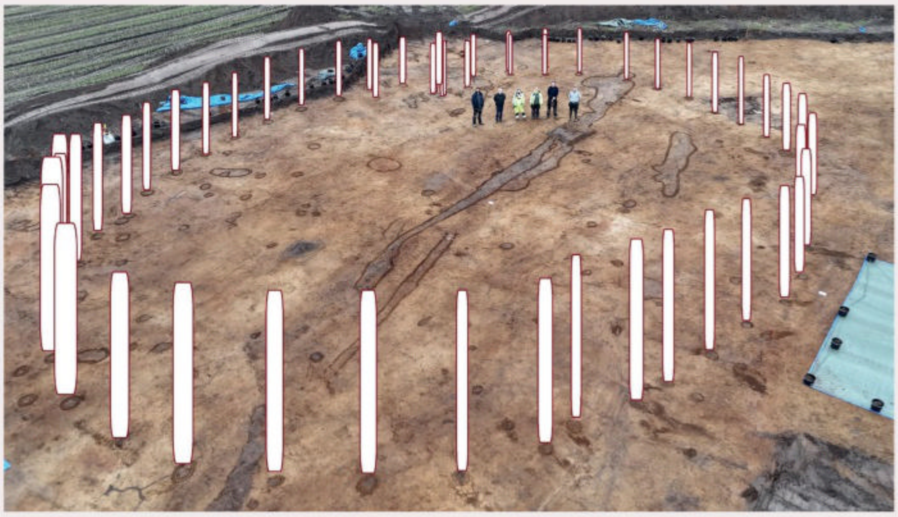
Tyler Robinson's fate hangs somewhere in the balance for now; killer or patsy, villain or hero, a cog in a conspiratorial engine that has long outgrown the mavericks in the margins, and threatens to swallow us all.

https://people.com/owner-of-plane-at-center-of-charlie-kirk-shooting-conspiracy-speaks-out-11808572; https://thegrayzone.substack.com/p/charlie-kirk-refused-netanyahu-funding; https://revolver.news/2025/09/stunning-leak-could-expose-who-assassinated-charlie-kirk/

ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING digs up the news on a newly discovered wooden henge and a very old loaf of bread



VESTHIMMERLANDS MUSEUM

LEFT: Excavation team at the North Jutland timber circle site, with overlaid images showing where the posts would have been. **BELOW LEFT**: The 5,000-year-old loaf of bread found at Kulluoba, Turkey. **BELOW**: Recreated loaves of Kulluoba bread baked by the Halk Ekmek bakery.

DANISH HENGE

Danish archæologists have uncovered a 4,000-year-old circle of wooden piles that they say could be linked to Stonehenge in Britain. The 45 Neolithic-era wooden pieces, in a circle with a diameter of about 30 metres (98ft), were found during work on a housing estate in the northwestern town of Aars. The piles are about two metres apart. "It is a once in a lifetime find," Sidsel Wahlin, conservationist at the town's Vesthimmerland museum, said. The circle "points to a strong connection with the British henge world," she added. The two circles of stones at Stonehenge in southern England are believed to have been erected between 3100 BC and 1600 BC. The Danish archæologists are now trying to find if there is an inner circle at the Aars site. Wahlin said that some timber circles, considered part of Sun worship, have been found on the Danish island of Bornholm. She added that the circle in Aars was "the first one of this larger type that we can properly investigate."

Archæologists first found an early Bronze Age (1700-1500 BC) settlement at the building site that included a chieftain's grave and a bronze sword. "When I and my colleague opened a new section of the excavation the expected house and some fence quickly turned out to be the entrance area of a very well planned, slightly oval structure," she added. The wooden circle is estimated to date from about 2000 BC. The archæologists are now looking for "ritual deposits" such as flint arrowheads and daggers as part of a major sampling exercise at the site. Wahlin said the next searches would seek to find if there were links between the region and other peoples, such as those who built Stonehenge. She said the influence of other regions could be seen in the pottery and graves that had been found. *RTE, 26 Feb 2025.*

ESKISEHIR ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM

MOULDY OLD DOUGH

In September 2024, archæologists unveiled a rare culinary find: a well-preserved loaf of ancient bread roughly 5,000 years old baked during the Bronze Age. The artefact was found during an archæological excavation at the Kulluoba site in Eskisehir province, central Turkey. Researchers say the bread was burnt and buried under the entrance of a dwelling dating back to 3,300 BC. Some of the bread, which measures about 5 inches (13cm) in diameter, was torn off before it was buried. An image of the loaf shows that it's blackened and crumbled with age – but it still retains the shape of bread.

Turkish bakers have recreated the bread. The recipe is based on an ancient wheat, which is best suited to drought conditions – shedding light on the climate of central Turkey during the Bronze Age. Serap Güler, the bakery's manager, told AFP the bread is made by combining "ancestral wheat flour, lentils and bulgur, [which] results in a rich, satiating, low-gluten, preservative-free bread." The cake-like loaves have reportedly been a hit with local residents. *Fox News, 31 May 2025.*

HALK EKMEK BAKERY

SIX FINGERS

Excavation of the Motza archæological site in the hills of Jerusalem, dating back to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period, found a 9,000-year-old Neolithic shaman woman. Anatomical analysis indicates that the woman was over 15 years old at the time of her death. Notably, she had six fingers on her left hand, a characteristic that in ancient cultures was often interpreted as a sign of distinction and spiritual authority. Funerary objects found alongside the woman, including green stone necklaces and mother-of-pearl jewellery, reinforce the hypothesis of her importance within Neolithic society. Most individuals were buried with decorations such as stone bracelets, pendants, and beads made from exotic materials like alabaster and green stones. According to researchers, the stone bracelets found in some graves are associated with transition rituals between life and death. *Jerusalem Post, 6 Feb 2025.*

OH LUCKY MAN!

A British troop ship torpedoed in World War I has been found in the Aegean Sea. Among the survivors from the *SS Arcadian* on 15 April 1917 was Thomas Threlfell, who had survived the *Titanic* sinking five years to the day earlier. Built as the ocean liner *Ortona*, she was chartered by the Royal Navy in 1915 and was hit en route from the Greek port of Salonika (now Thessaloniki) to Alexandria in Egypt. There were 1,058 survivors and 279 dead. "The *Titanic* stopped afloat for a couple of hours, and we had time to turn around, but of course you could not live in the water that night," recalled Mr Threlfell. "This time we had calm sea and warm weather, and you had a chance, but with the *Titanic* you died in the water almost as soon as you got in." *Arcadian* went down just five minutes after the torpedo blast from a U-boat at the island of Ikaria. Her wreck was found at a depth of 535ft (163m) southeast of the island of Sifnos – still upright and with the torpedo hole visible. No remains or personal items were found on the vessel, which was explored externally using a remotely operated vehicle. Thomas Threlfell died in Liverpool in 1934. *D.Express, 16 Aug 2024.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

315: LIFE GOES ON DAY AFTER DAY

So did Gerry and the Pacemakers. Still, suppose we should, after Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, afford them some Quality of Mersey.

I've previously [**FT255:17**] surveyed the archæology and history of Pompeii. This column is devoted to the city's graffiti and what they tell us about everyday and everynight life there.

Texts of the 11,000+ graffiti are collected in volume 4 of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. If, like Peter Cook, you haven't got the Latin for the judging, Jack Lindsay's *The Writing on the Wall* (1960) has an abundance of translated ones, whilst the amatory side is well provided for in M Della Corte's *Loves and Lovers in Ancient Pompeii* (English tr. 1980). Many websites offer selections large and small. Keep an eye on the Ancient Graffiti Project. Three excellent analytic surveys are: K Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii* (2014); P Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (2014); R Reisner, *Graffiti: Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing* (1971 – spanning Kilroys from Pompeii to New York).

En Passant, if any readers are graffiti-mongers, there's a word for them: Rhyparographer.

"Graffiti is [sic] one of the few tools you have if you have almost nothing. And even if you don't come up with a picture to cure world poverty you can make someone smile while they're having a piss" – Banksy.

Our mysterious mural artist had Pompeian forerunners, given the presence of some quite elaborate word squares. Also with poet Persius (in Nero's time) who likened writing his *Satires* to a naughty boy pissing in sacred precincts while scribbling insults behind the emperor's back. Earlier love poet Catullus threatened to cover tavern walls with his abusive epigrams and phallic images.

One ancient who would have deplored Banksy was the starchy Plutarch: "There is nothing in graffiti either useful or pleasing – only so-and-so remembers so-and-so and many things full of such nonsense."

No evidence Plutarch was in Pompeii. But, he'd have seen graffiti in Rome at least. No comparable surviving abundance here. We know, though, from Suetonius (*Life of Nero*, ch39) that people chalked up very personal insults, which he treated with remarkable tolerance.

NAPLES NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

At least three Pompeians agreed with Plutarch, there being separate handwritings of: "I'm gob-smacked, O Wall, that you haven't fallen down under the weight of so much rubbish."

Reviewing Milnor's book (*TLS*, 17 June 2015), Emily Gowers remarks on Pompeii's "disproportionate amount of graffiti and erotic wall-painting." This is misleading: had we masses of mural mutterings from other cities, a similar picture might well have emerged. Also, as well as Catullus and Persius above, the following piece of cracker-barrel philosophy is found in many different locations:

Balnea, Vina, Venus, corrumpunt corpora nostra Sed vitam faciunt (Baths, Booze, Birds destroy our bodies but they make life – full texts with references on the *Nihil Novum Sub Sole* (Nothing New Under the Sun) website.

Hedonism is truly THE world-wide philosophy, embedded of course in the American Declaration of Independence's 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness' – Note that Happiness itself is not guaranteed, only its quest.

Another aspect concentrated on by Milnor, Gowers, and others is the Pompeian presence of verse graffiti, especially quotations (frequently inaccurate) and parodies of Virgil, elsewhere dissected by James Franklin, 'Vergil at Pompeii: A Teacher's Aid,' *Classical Journal* 92 (1996), 175-84, and Peter Kruschwitz, 'Patterns of text layout in Pompeian verse inscriptions,' *Studia Philologica Valentina* 11 (2008), 225-64 – online.

It is clear that Virgil was hammered into everyone who had any sort of education – there are at least 50 quotations. Gowers aptly compares the popularity of the Æneid's opening line, "Arms and the Man I Sing" with "To Be or Not To Be" or "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck".

This, and other lines, were niftily re-deployed. One shopkeeper advertised, "I sing of fullers and the screech-owl, not arms and the man," taking us (Gowers's words) neatly from the Olympian heights of Augustan literature to the worlds of street traders and craft guilds, the owl being the fullers' mascot.

Likewise, 'Arms and the Man' is subscribed to an electoral poster containing the acronym DIDO, Æneas's deserted lover.

There are suggestions that some graffiti may be the work of children or teenagers, from crude sexual claims and desires to poignant yearnings. If correct, I am immediately drawn to The Hollies' best song, 'Jennifer Eccles', which recalls my own earliest 'pash' at Mixed Infants.

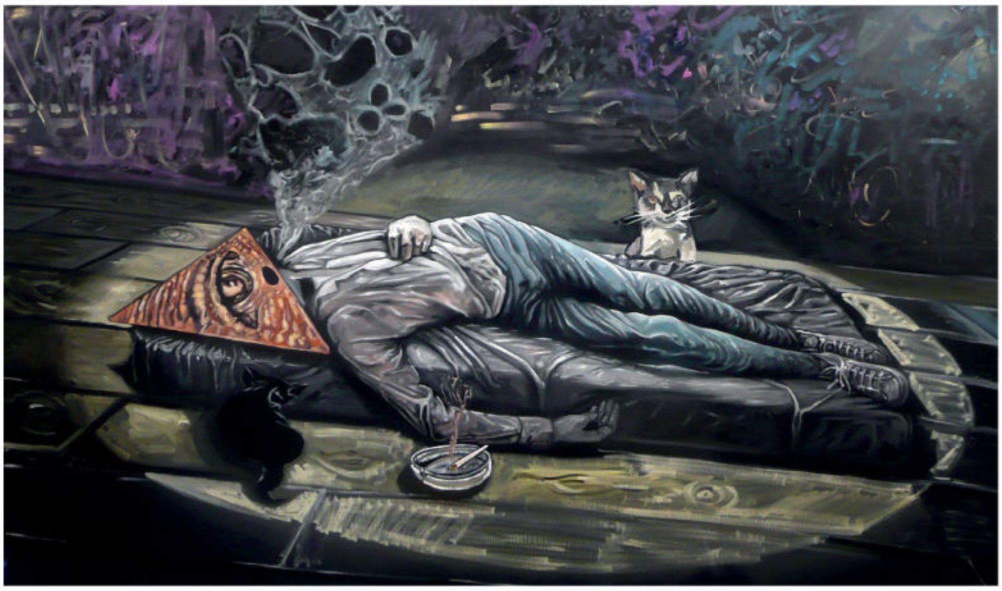
Suspect the editorial space-guillotine is looming, so you'll have to wait to next column for cornucopia of examples, including 'the dirty ones', here signing off with this Dion de Mucci hit ditty:

Peel the years back, see it all / Written on the subway wall.

EXHIBITION REPORT

BETWEEN SLEEPING AND WAKING:
HOSPITAL DREAMS AND VISIONS

"To sleep, perchance to dream…" **DAVID V BARRETT** visits a new exhibition exploring uneasy dreams, disturbing visions, and sometimes nightmares at the Museum of the Mind in London's Bethlem hospital.



BETHLEM MUSEUM OF THE MIND

LEFT: *Everything is Real*, George Harding (2010). **BELOW LEFT**: *Night Tides*, Kate McDonnell.

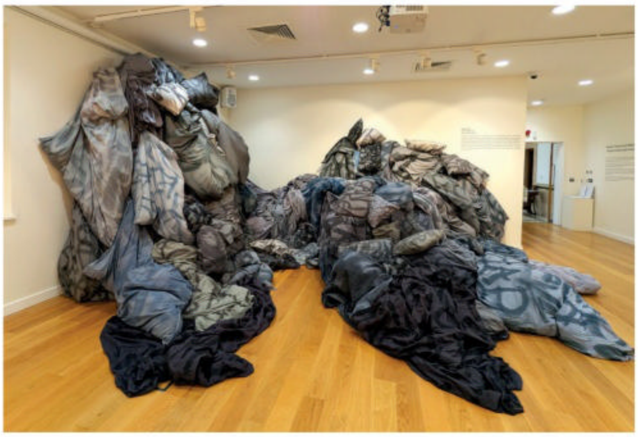
At the foot of the stairs up to the Bethlem Museum of the Mind in Beckenham, south London, are two massive writhing naked male figures by 17th-century sculptor Caius Gabriel Cibber, known as *Raving Madness* and *Melancholy*, from the gates of one of Bethlem's previous sites at Moorfields in central London.

In stark contrast, the first thing you see when you enter this exhibition about dreams and visions is a huge pile of bedding, duvets and pillows all jumbled together in the corner of the room. *Night Tides* is oddly disturbing: it feels confined, constricting, especially when you step into it. I told the artist, Kate McDonnell, that it was disquieting, and she leapt on the word. She wanted to create a visceral visual image of how it feels when you wake from a bad dream and you can't get back to sleep; however much you move your bedding around, it's lumpy and uncomfortable and feels *wrong*. All the bedding in the artwork, she said, had actually been slept in; none was new.

The first thing you see when you enter is a huge pile of bedding

Night Tides is the only contemporary piece, and the only non painting or drawing in the exhibition *Between Sleeping and Waking: Hospital Dreams and Visions* at the museum. Artists include the mother of a recent prime minister, and a would-be assassin of a king.

Bethlem, known in the past as Bedlam, and from which we get the word, is the first institution in the UK to care for people with mental health issues. Founded in 1247 as a priory, it began looking after 'pauper lunatics' in the early 1400s and is still a major psychiatric hospital, set in beautifully restful grounds, today.

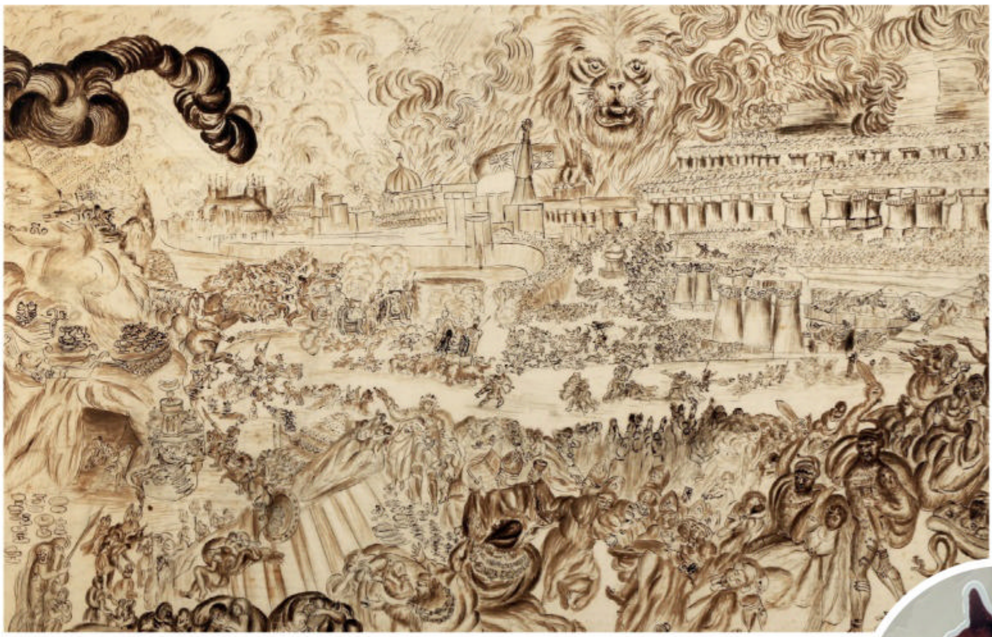


MICHAEL BARRETT

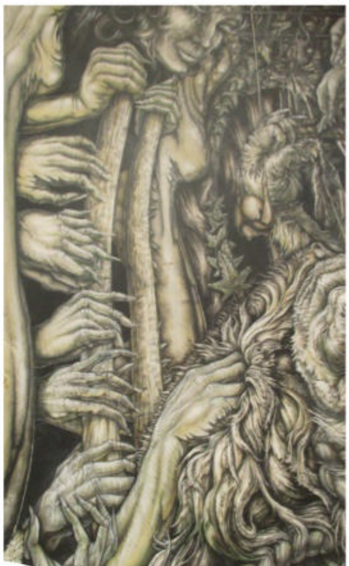
There's a long history of patients at what used to be called asylums creating weird, fascinating art; perhaps the best-known example is Richard Dadd, who escaped execution for murdering his father and was sent to Bethlem, where he produced his astonishingly detailed fairy paintings, among others. Dadd's not in this exhibition, but other patients from Bethlem or the linked Maudsley Hospital from the last 200 years are, including Charlotte Johnson-Wahl, who self-admitted herself for anxiety problems in 1974 when her son Boris was nine. She had her own exhibition here a year ago; her two paintings in this one are screams of rage against her treatment, which today would be judged harsh, extreme and counter-productive.

Johnson-Wahl painted throughout her time at the hospital; in *Phobia*, where she is covered in insects, she thumbs her nose at the therapist who had deliberately moved her paints and canvasses into a room that she had a horror of. *Ask, and Get No Reassurance* complains about her exposure therapy: to cure her fear of contamination, honey (or possibly urine) was poured on her hands and she was forbidden to wash them. A starkly harrowing and claustrophobic painting by her in the permanent museum across the landing is entitled simply *It Has Not Worked*. There have been many fads and phases in mental health treatment, and not all of them were helpful; her personal anguish is self-evident.

Many of the paintings illustrate common dream tropes: being chased, falling, floating through the air, arriving late,



BETHLEM MUSEUM OF THE MIND.



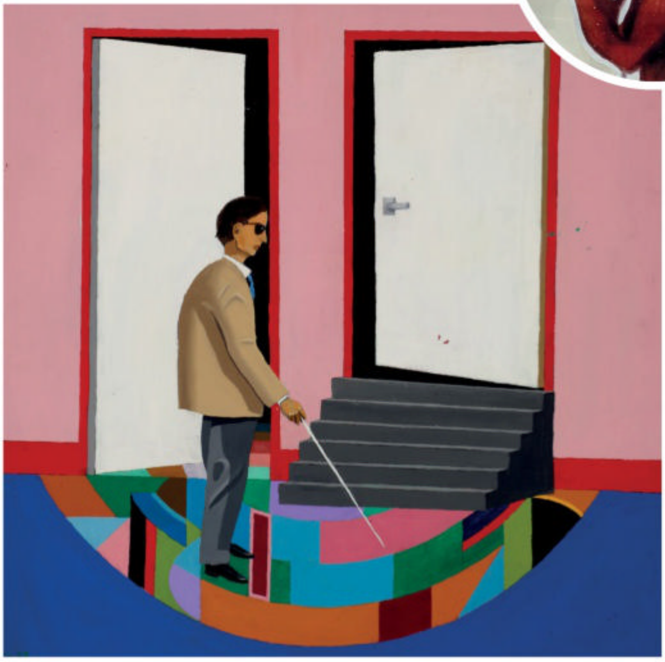
DAVID V BARRETT

ABOVE LEFT: *London's Overthrow*, Jonathan Martin (c.1830). **ABOVE RIGHT**: Detail from *Oestrum*, Von Stropp (1985). **BELOW**: *Indecision*, Bryan Charnley, 1983. **RIGHT**: James Hadfield's squirrel (c.1834)

anxiety, difficult decisions. One, Bryan Charnley's *Indecision* (1983), simply shows a man with a white stick facing two part-open doors; which should he enter? Another, Margery Penfold's *Despair* (1936), reminiscent of the Tarot Fool card, shows a figure stepping off a headland over the sea.

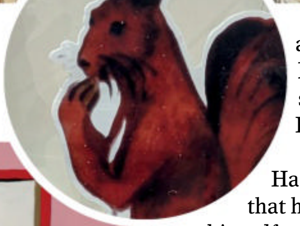
One of the most striking works is based on Henry Wallis's famous 1866 painting of the young poet Thomas Chatterton's suicide. *Everything is Real except God and Death* (2010) is a self-portrait by George Harding, not dead but stoned, with his head replaced by the Eye of Providence. Reality is regularly subverted in dreams, says the caption; dreaming of someone as alive who is dead – or more distressingly, the other way around.

Sexual experiences can be both the most enjoyable and the most disturbing of our dreams. *Oestrum* (1985) by the pseudonymous Vonn Stropp, is an astonishing entangled collection of faces, hands, arms, hair and other body parts (including sexual), amongst leaves and eggs. In places the painting is almost 3D; the caption says it's "Acrylic and Polyfilla on board".



MICHAEL BARRETT

Two more historical works are by patients – probably then known as inmates – who had fallen foul of the law. Jonathan Martin, brother of the apocalyptic artist John Martin, believed in the imminence of divine judgement on worldly corruption; he particularly condemned bishops for their love of "bottles of wine, and roast beef and plum pudding". He was sent to Bethlem for the rest of his life after attempting to burn down York Minster (see **FT43:54-57**). His large ink drawing, *London's Overthrow* (1830), based on his brother's painting, *The Fall of Nineveh*, is a nightmarish vision of a burning city with flames and smoke and warring figures. St Paul's and Westminster Abbey are on fire, and a huge lion's face looks out from the swirling smoke above London.



BETHLEM MUSEUM OF THE MIND.

In 1800 James Hadfield, convinced that he must sacrifice himself to save mankind from the end of the world, attempted to assassinate King George III at the Drury Lane Theatre in central London. His lawyer successfully argued that he was a religious maniac and incurably insane, and he was committed to Bethlem for the remaining 41 years of his life. He was allowed pets – not just cats and dogs, but birds and squirrels as well. He made his baccy money from visitors buying illustrated epitaphs to his pets. The one in the exhibition (c. 1834) is to his squirrel Jack which, "frighten'd by a cat", fell, was injured and died.

The dreams and visions are fascinating; many are deeply disturbing as you see how the patients suffered, not only from their illnesses but too often by their treatment. The exhibition is free, as is the permanent museum on the same floor.

Between Sleeping and Waking: Hospital Dreams and Visions is at the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, Beckenham, London, until 8 November 2025.

Jurassic Park for real

DAVID HAMBLING traces our ever-evolving understanding of prehistoric beasts

In August, researchers described fossil remains found in Morocco of Spicomellus, a new armoured dinosaur with a collar of spikes. Creatures that no human ever saw can now be described in detail – but how much do we really know?

Early epic fails included the infamous 1663 Magdeburg Unicorn, which combined a narwhal horn with the skull of a woolly rhinoceros and bones from a woolly mammoth. Elsewhere, mammoth skulls were misidentified as the remains of one-eyed giant cyclopes and plesiosaurs were thought to be sea serpents.

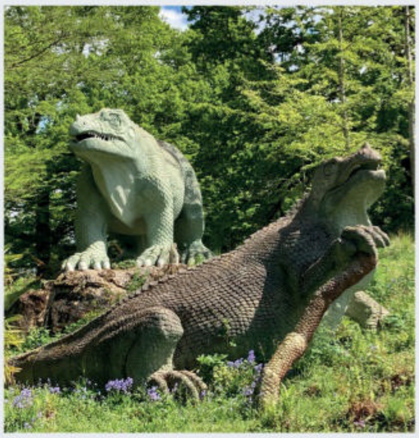
The 1854 Geological Court at Crystal Palace in South London was one of the earliest serious attempts to accurately recreate dinosaurs – the original Jurassic Park. The prehistoric beasts, which can still be seen today, were reconstructed using brick and concrete rather than DNA, though, a choice that has meant fewer visitors being eaten by the exhibits.

Sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins created the Crystal Palace monsters drawing on the best available scientific evidence. These were early days: the first dinosaur, Megalosaurus, had been described and formally named just 30 years previously. For comparison, the first *Jurassic Park* movie was 32 years ago.

The earliest artworks had shown dinosaurs as resembling dragons, with long serpentine tails and massive teeth, following the idea of interpreting fossils as mythical beasts. These were superseded by reconstructions more like giant lizards, but Hawkins's dinosaurs followed the latest thinking and resembled modern mammals.

Hawkins's chief advisor was Richard Owen (see **FT462:54-56**), who had coined the term 'dinosaur' and had a proven talent for deducing a creature's body structure from isolated parts. However, Owen did not accept Darwin's theory of Natural Selection, believing that evolution was guided by a divine plan. He tended to view dinosaurs as cruder and more primitive than modern animals, which he saw as 'more advanced'.

Among the iconic dinosaur models at Crystal Palace are two Iguanodons. As Owen noted at the time, these were mosaics, reconstructed from the fossil remains at different sites – and, as, we now know, from different species, which did not help accuracy.



LEFT: Two of the 1854 Crystal Palace Iguanadons with their 'horns'.

DAVID HAMBLING

Hawkins created the Crystal Palace monsters drawing on the best scientific evidence

These Iguanodons have a nasal horn like a rhinoceros. This, an interpretation by Owen's great rival Gideon Mantell based on iguana anatomy, was a mistake. As Owen pointed out at the time, the 'horn' was actually a thumb spike.

The Iguanodon models dated quickly as further discoveries revealed they should be bipeds and of slighter build than Hawkins's chunky monsters. Other iguanadon fossils revealed stiff supporting tendons in the tail, showing they were held horizontally. This makes sense for a bipedal creature needing a counterbalance, and the Crystal Palace dinosaurs should not be dragging their tails on the ground.

Finally, Hawkins's dinosaurs are covered in thick scales. We know from later fossilised skin studies that Iguanodons actually had a leathery skin, more like elephant hide than alligator.

Scientific ideas about the appearance of dinosaurs has, appropriately enough, undergone a steady process of evolution.

Microscopic examination of pigment particles known as melanosomes occasionally preserved in fossils has shown that at least some dinosaurs were not monochrome. The armoured Borealopelta was reddish-brown, with definite counter-shading. This is a common camouflage scheme in which the underside of a creature is lighter than the top, to negate the highlighting and shadow effect of lighting from above and makes the creature harder to see from a distance. Psittacosaurus has stripes and spots on its limbs in a disruptive pattern, like a giraffe or zebra.

Another major discovery was that some dinosaurs had feathers, likely to help with heat retention, while others were covered in fur-like filaments called pycnofibers. Some of these were also coloured: Anchiornis, a flightless bipedal dinosaur the size of crow, had black, white and grey body feathers and a crest of dark red feathers. We do not know whether Iguanodons were feathered, but this remains a tantalising possibility until more fossils are discovered and examined microscopically.

Palæontology has become steadily more sophisticated when it comes to analysing body plan, muscle and tendon attachments and filling in the soft tissue. In Hawkins's day, a small quadruped might be assumed to resemble a miniature deer; but modern examination could reveal details showing it was more like a sloth, or a beaver – animals of the same general size and outline, but very different in the flesh.

However, soft tissue, including things like ruffs and frills, is rarely preserved. Dinosaurs may have had many startling external features which we have not yet discovered.

Behaviour is also full of blank spaces. We know now, at least, that dinosaurs were active and warm blooded, and fossil evidence shows they nurtured and looked after their young. What we cannot tell yet is how intelligent they were. Birds, their closest living relatives, are still surprising scientists with their feats of learning and intellect. Could some dinosaurs have been as intelligent as primates?

At least we should not have to radically overhaul our general image of Iguanodons again. They will remain lightly-build bipeds, and the thumb spike will probably not migrate to the tail. But how they behaved – whether they were timid or aggressive, solitary or gregarious, dumb as rocks or dangerously smart – will remain mysterious until our methods of studying them improve.

The science grows steadily more sophisticated, bringing dinosaurs into ever sharper focus and uncovering more strange and interesting beasts like the spikey Spicomellus. Accumulating evidence from different sources means we can be more confident in our conclusions.

Meanwhile, 40 per cent of Americans still believe that dinosaurs lived at the same time as humans.

JUST PLANE WEIRD

Strange tales from the skies, including a serial mystery plane pincher, chemtrail controversies and a pilot tripping balls...

JASON HONG

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Who has been taking off in Jason Hong's Cessna? **ABOVE RIGHT**: Pilot Joseph Emerson: psilocybin mushrooms and passenger jets don't mix.

MYSTERY PILOT

While at 75, Jason Hong rarely flew anymore, he still owned a colourful single engine 1958 Cessna Skyhawk that he called his "old treasure". Making a rare visit to the plane at Corona Municipal Airport, in California, he found his Cessna was not where he thought he'd left it. "I got confused," he said. "I thought, 'Did I park it somewhere else? Did the airport manager move it?' But I looked all over." The plane was no longer at the airport, so a baffled Hong reported it missing to local police. Shortly afterwards, he got a call telling him the Cessna had turned up at Brackett Field Airport, still in California, but some distance away.

Following this up, Hong went to Brackett Field, and, he said, "There's my airplane, sitting there in the airport", its cockpit strewn with rubbish and cigarette ends that had definitely not been there when the non-smoking Hong had last seen the craft. To prevent whoever had taken it using the plane again, Hong took the battery out and went home, intending to return and clean the aircraft up the following week; but when he did, it had gone again. This time, after reporting its second disappearance to the police, Hong got the news it was at San Gabriel Valley Airport, where he found it with a brand new battery installed, as well as a new headset, which would have cost someone hundreds of dollars. This confused Hong, who said: "Someone breaks into your house, they're looking for jewellery or cash right? But in this case, what's the purpose? It's like someone breaks my window, and then they put a new one up."

By now, the plane's adventures were also perplexing police. "This plane just keeps disappearing out of the blue," said Sgt Robert Montanez of the Corona Police Department. "It's just weird," particularly as they could find no trace of the mystery pilot. "There's no camera video, there's no real leads as to who stole the plane," Montanez said. There were reports of a woman in her 40s or 50s being seen in the Cessna on several occasions, although no one could identify her. Flight tracking sites show that after it was taken from Corona it had been used multiple times, which means whoever was taking it was an experienced pilot. "Landing is not easy, so they're trained," Hong said, and as they had replaced the battery, they were probably familiar with the mechanics of aircraft and had access to the right tools. In the meantime, with the police seemingly incapable of preventing the mystery flyer using Hong's plane, he's chained it to the ground at San Gabriel Valley Airport, saying, "I have no idea what to do, it's the strangest thing." *latimes.com, 8 Aug 2025.*

FLYING HIGH

Off duty pilot Joseph Emerson was riding in the cockpit of an Alaskan Airlines flight from Everett in Washington state to San Francisco, California, on 22 October 2023 when he told the pilots "I am not OK". He then lunged for the controls and tried to cut off the power to the engines, but one of the pilots successfully wrestled Emerson into submission and ushered him out of the cockpit.

Handed over to the custody of the flight attendants, Emerson said "You need to cuff me right now or it's going to be bad," and later in the flight, which had to be diverted to Portland, Oregon, he made an attempt to grab the emergency exit handle as the airliner started its descent. He was arrested as soon as it landed. Emerson told a flight attendant, "I messed everything up" and that he "tried to kill everybody".

In court, Emerson explained that he had been self-medicating with powerful doses of psychedelic mushrooms to help him deal with depression, and at the time of the incident "had not been able to perceive reality", adding "that doesn't make this right." *BBC News, 6 Sept 2025.*

UNHAPPY TRAILS

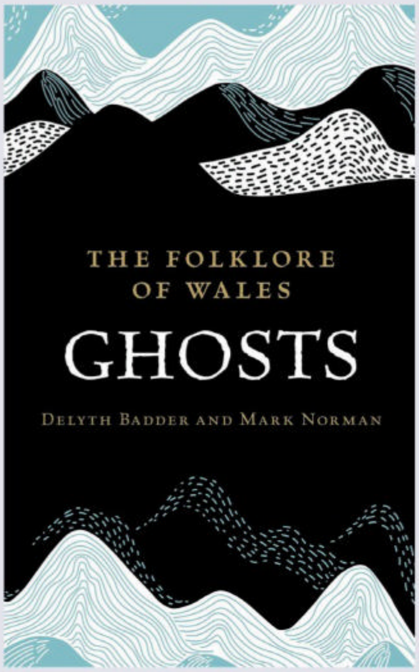
This year, eight US states, including Florida and Tennessee, have introduced legislation that amounts to thinly disguised attempts to outlaw chemtrails, much loved by conspiracy theorists (see **FT460:17**), but long proven to be nothing more than misinterpreted aircraft vapour trails.

The legislation refers to "geo-engineering" or "weather modification", and while prohibiting such things, does not impose penalties for producing chemtrails, but requires sightings to be recorded and passed to the air national guard, as well as mandating further investigation and documentation of the phenomenon. Conspiracies suggest chemtrails are used to control the weather or spread mind control chemicals, and a 2016 survey found that 10 per cent of Americans think this is "completely true" and 20-30 percent think it is "somewhat true".

Timothy Tangherlini, from the Berkeley School of Information said, "Jets flying through the air and contrails of condensed water should not in any way be linked to disease, viruses, mind control, but you look at some of the extractions we get from our mining of social media, and if it wasn't real you'd think your code wasn't working or in hysterics", adding "It's a very interesting thing to do – you can create this totalising threat everywhere you look… So there is a siege mentality." *theguardian.com, 8 Jun 2025.*

Call of Cthulhu in the valleys?

ALAN MURDIE heads to Wales in search of weird ghosts, silver spacemen and cosmic forces



One is faced with such spectres as tailless black sow and a nun who turns into a rabbit

Just where did all the weird ghosts go is a question that has been posed in *Fortean Times*. One answer might be Wales.

Ghost hunter John Harries declared, "In order to meet a Welsh ghost one really needs to be Welsh" (*The Ghost Hunters Road Book*, 1968), but for those who are not, an excellent guide book has appeared lately – *The Folklore of Wales: Ghosts* (2024) by Delyth Badder and Mark Norman. They demonstrate ghosts in Wales are a truly diverse lot. Particularly valuable are the authors' copious translations of archival and documented material inaccessible to non-Welsh speaking readers. Also provided is a helpful glossary of Welsh language supernatural terms.

Ringing from the pages are words and dread names: *Cyhyraeth* (skeleton, apparition, death portent), *Drychiolaeth* (apparition, spectre, revelation) and *Gwrach-y-rhibyn* ('portentous apparition in the guise of a hag').

I remember once discussing the *Cwn du* (ghostly black dogs) with my great friend the late Revd J Towyn Jones of Carmarthen, who held a degree in the Welsh language, and he cited the wonderfully evocative 'dogs of the dusk' the *cwn y cyfnos*.

Scholars and linguists alike will appreciate this rich vocabulary. Less scholarly horror fans faced with these names will probably think they are entering a world dreamed up by HP Lovecraft. Which might not be a completely far-fetched comparison, since, as the book's authors argue, Welsh ghostlore "possesses its own extremely specific imagery, rituals and belief systems which are not precisely replicated anywhere else". One is faced with spectres such as a tailess black sow, figures in luminous armour, a nun who turns into a rabbit, a spotted fox-like creature, angelic visions and singing from the clouds.

Welsh ghosts are also found to casually break some of the general working rules presumed to apply to ghost experiences, for example the view that graveyards are relatively unhaunted: e.g. "There are very few cases of genuine haunted graveyards…" (Andrew Green, *Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide*, 1973, 2016) or "Only one ghost is thought to exist in a graveyard." (*Usborne The World of the Unknown; Ghosts*, 1977) I actually considered this an entirely modern consensus, based upon 20th century ghost reports, or rather the absence of them, in graveyards until reading in *Brand's Popular Antiquities* (first published 1777, but expanded): "Churchyards are certainly as little frequented by apparitions and ghosts as other places, and therefore it is a weakness to be afraid of passing through them." (Vol II, Ellis edit. 1900, p.291) In contrast, Badder and Norman state bluntly: "Welsh ghosts are here to disprove that theory."

Others in past generations have surveyed this same extraordinary ghostly territory. Most notable was the indomitable Revd Edmund Jones (1702-1793), a dissenting minister who devoted some 70 years to missionary work around the country, setting forth into a cursed and pestilent landscape infested by the emissaries of darkness (it's changed since then, of course!)

Jones recorded numerous testimonies to ghostly experiences in his book *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits in the Principality of Wales* (1780) published in his 78th year. His express purpose for gathering this collection was twofold: a request from a learned antiquarian body, the 'Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion' and as a religious crusade to refute atheists and sceptics of the Enlightenment (it reached Wales late), naysayers whom Jones dubs 'Sadducees' (after the first century Jewish sect of aristocratic sceptics). Yet one senses it's a superficial justification. The 100 cases he collected display a dedication to research that puts many of today's armchair ghost hunters to shame. Jones clearly relished his labours – even more impressive given he set forth in an era when roads were poor or even non-existent, with routes sometimes impassable with snow or heavy rain as well as lacking all the modern forms of communication and numerous modern conveniences we take for granted.

Folk horror has nothing on some of his stories (albeit Badder and Norman consider him somewhat credulous). Jones records apparitions like a "Skull carrying a candle" a "bowl of fire as large as a pompion" (pumpkin) shooting out flames; a "dark mist" that turned a man's hair white; the grinning double of a woman who died soon after; a man moving beast-like on all fours who howled. Jones mentions an aerial hunt sharing the curious characteristic of the notorious Berbalangs of Cagayan Sulu (Philippines) in sounding louder at a distance and quieter when close up (see Rupert Gould, *Enigmas*, 1929).

Bizarre as many seem, nonetheless some striking similarities also exist with accounts beyond Wales. We find what are recognisable as poltergeists, crisis apparitions and related death omens and even weirder parallels too. Jones supplies an account of the experience of a man who, as a boy aged seven and accompanied by his young sister and two older friends observed "a company of dancers in the middle of the field" at Bodvary, Denbighshire, around the year 1757. The dancers "were cloathed in red all over like soldiers, with red handkerchiefs, sprig'd, and spotted with yellow about their heads… They seemed to be a little bigger than we, but of a dwarfish appearance.”

LEFT: The late Rev J Towyn Jones, Congregationalist Minister, writer and ghost researcher.

KEITH MORRIS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

What is curious is finding matches perceivable far from the Denbighshire of c.1757. In *Haunted East Anglia* (1974) Joan Forman reports the experience recalled from childhood by a Mr B Waterman. He and his brother, when aged nine and seven respectively, saw seven or eight figures dancing in a circle in a meadow at Harpers Lane in Saxmundham. The dance was described as a “kind of follow my leader in a circle”. The dancers’ faces were concealed.

Or, perhaps even more remarkable, consider the account of dancing figures in the New Mexico desert collected from a Native American witness by the late Antonio Garcia, and published in *American Indian Ghost Stories of the Southwest* (2000). As a teenager, Garcia’s informant recalled being out in the wilderness when his surroundings became intensely silent. All natural sounds ceased “no birds anywhere and no wind blowing either”. This was followed by what sounded like an enormous flock of birds flapping their wings. Looking out into a clearing he saw two figures with concealed faces apparently covered in a cloth appear and begin a strange dance. Keeping himself well hidden, he watched the strange movements of these two mysterious figures who “...stood up, bowed down, turned around and slowly moved away from each other. Several times they got down on all fours, and for many minutes, turned in complete circles. It seemed like they were dancing...”

Eventually, after the teenager inadvertently made a noise, the figures vanished, and terrified, he ran for his life. Eventually reaching home, he babbled out his story to his father who solemnly told him: “Those were not things you should have been watching. You should not have been sneaking up on those spirits. They need to be left alone when they dance...”. This was received from a man of Apache heritage, ‘Henry Tall Horse’, and might be derided as a ‘Tall Story’, but I find it improbable he was familiar with Joan Forman or the Revd Edmund Jones.

For The Revd Edmund Jones, who was closer in time to the original sources, the Principality was a giant arena for the battling powers of light and darkness. “These Spirits of darkness do not like the crowing of the cock, because it gives notice of the approach of the day, for they love darkness rather than light.”

Not all ghosts were necessarily evil but nowhere, he advises, is safe from Satan and for many the afterlife is not rest in Heaven but eternal insanity on Earth. This juxtaposition between light and dark is not an original sentiment. The 12th century chronicler Gerald of Wales (1146-1223) in his work *The Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales* expressed the same marked polarity: “The Welsh go to extremes in all matters. You may never find anyone worse than a Welshman, but you will never find anyone better than a good one.” What was once reckoned with the living seems equally applicable with the dead. Gerald also wrote of invisible spirits that have the habit “of throwing refuse all over the place, more keen perhaps to be a nuisance than to do any real harm”, which Lewis Thorpe, translator for the 1977 Penguin Classics edition, readily identified as a poltergeist (p.43).

The religious backdrop and perspective to many of these apparition claims is obvious, with Badder and Norman detailing this in their section “holy ghosts”, which they define “those which intersect with church and chapel culture in Wales” (p.93). *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits in the Principality of Wales* is full of examples where a religious interpretation or mindset is identifiable in the narratives, further moulded by Edmund Jones.

With altered paradigms claims of extraordinary spectres from Wales continue into modern times. Fast forward to the 20th century, and extraordinary beings made a comeback during the truly remarkable year of 1977, which saw a major Welsh UFO flap. In February, children attending Broad Haven Primary School watched an entity resembling a silver man with pointed ears emerging from a flying craft (see **FT357:16-18**).

Contemporaneously, alarming paranormal events descended upon the Coombs family living at the ominously named Ripperston Farm, near St Brides in Pembrokeshire. Their experiences included a menacing visit from a silver-suited spaceman-like figure peering through their windows. Even as cautious an authority as Dr David Clarke stated in FT in 2005: “There was no doubt the couple had seen something unusual, but what?” (**FT200:24-25**).

To at least one researcher such manifestations prompted thoughts of a symbolic and Lovecraftian confrontation between cosmic forces of good and evil. This was cryptozoologist FW Holiday (1930-1979). Beginning originally as angling correspondent for the *Western Mail* and author of such practical works as *Sea Trout: How to Catch Them* (1956) and *Fishing in Wales* (1964) Holiday became obsessed over landing the biggest catch of all – the Loch Ness Monster. From initially speculating that Nessie was a giant soft-bodied invertebrate (a sort of super slug or worm) Holiday ditched physical theories, postulating Nessie was a psychic projection sharing characteristics with ghosts and UFOs, reflected in his eccentric book *The Dragon and the Disc* (1973). Intuitions of this greater scheme had apparently begun after his own UFO sighting at Tenby in October 1966, shortly before the Aberfan coal tip disaster (“Was God at Aberfan?”,

ABOVE LEFT: The Coombs family of Ripperston Farm. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Children from Broad Haven Primary School with sketches of their 1977 UFO sighting.

Flying Saucer Review July-August 1972; see **FT350:44-51**). Convinced that cosmic powers were operating, presenting as symbols of good and evil, Holiday's belief that the evil was hitching itself onto the monster led to the famed Loch Ness exorcism by the Revd Donald Omand in 1973 (see **FT447:30-37**).

Returning to Wales to investigate the 1977-78 UFO wave Holiday co-wrote *The Dyfed Enigma* (1981) with veterinary surgeon Randall Jones Pugh, adding the perspectives of fairy believers and leyliners.

More recently, between 1997-2012, extraordinary sightings of apparitions, poltergeist phenomena and wall writings reportedly beset the isolated home of the Gower family at Penyfforrd Farm in Flintshire following an Irish couple sighting what they interpreted as the Virgin Mary in a nearby field in 1997. ("Ghost hunting at haunted house that sparked Hollywood interest", BBC Podcast 16 Aug 2023. See also **FT113:26, 122:50, 128:53, 151:54, 437:61**).

Now one must make it clear that Badder and Norman, as folklorists, avoid such esoteric speculations in their work, maintaining a cautiously materialist paradigm on all things, and keenly supplying instances of how apparitional sightings may be explained (or at least explained away). Some ghosts arise from mistaken perceptions of natural phenomena and others are likely to be hoaxes. Indeed, local enquiries by the Revd Towyn Jones of Carmarthen into the Ripperston Farm 'spaceman' indicated a human prankster who had donned an asbestos fire protection suit borrowed from a local factory. (A similar explanation has been put forward for the Risley 'Silver Man'; see **FT397:36-41, 400:72-73**.)

Accordingly, a materialist historian might ascribe strange phantoms to people inventing or hallucinating within the framework of cultural beliefs prevailing at the time (e.g. religion in the 18th century and paranormal or UFOs beliefs in the 20th century). Yet the history of science shows repeatedly the fact that a theory or paradigm 'works' and produces tangible results does not necessarily prove its underlying assumptions are correct.

Could also a third interpretation be possible – that some of these apparitions do actually involve extraordinary phenomena generated by the human mind or minds (but minds operating very differently to current material conceptions)?

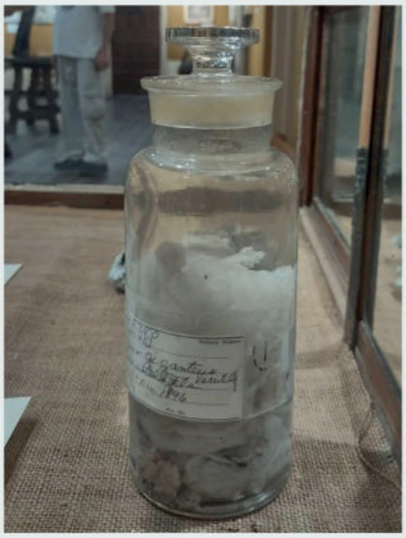
To some extent, can people create their own phantoms, chimeras and phenomena which also have some independent existence, albeit a fleeting one? Some parapsychologists and forteans have thought so, raising the hypothesis that apparitions may be generated by psi powers not by supernatural entities. One may think of the Philip Experiment in Toronto in 1972 where a group invented a 'ghost' and succeeded in creating rapping sounds and cool breezes. Mediums have been known to convincingly channel people believed dead but who subsequently turn out later to be very much alive (see Presidential Address in 1972 by Professor CWK Mundle (1972), *SPR Proceedings* XXXV). Instances of telepathy and cases of 'ghosts of the living' might suggest this. In other words, humans actually generate the phenomena and visions ("Have we to reckon with a special Phantom Forming Predisposition?" by George Zorab, *Journal* of the SPR 48, 1975-76, pp.19-30; *Apparitions*, 1942, by GNM Tyrrell; *The Hidden Powers of Nature*, 2001, by Manfred Cassirer).

If such a hypothesis were correct, we might conceive a form of magical causation is operating within the material world, arising from ourselves. Sir Arthur Eddington put it in *Space, Time and Gravitation* (1929): "We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories, one after another, to account for its origin. At last, we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And Lo! it is our own."

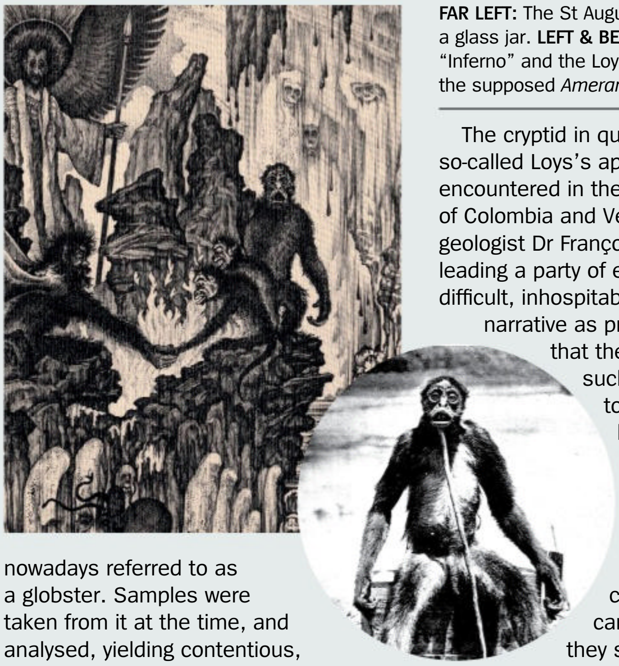
This might avoid unpalatable alternatives. However, it would not surprise me if traditions of such vivacity turn out still to have life in them and reports of such manifestations surface again before long. If so, who will be equipped to meet them?

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER finds crypto-discoveries in unlikely places, with a little help from his friends...



AIMEE NAWORAL



FAR LEFT: The St Augustine globster sample in a glass jar. **LEFT & BELOW:** Hermann Wöhler's "Inferno" and the Loys's 'ape' hoax photo of the supposed *Ameranthropoides loysi*.

MAPPING A CRYPTO-SPECIMEN

Cryptozoological specimens are notorious for being almost as elusive as the cryptids themselves, with a worrying tendency to vanish out of sight, never to be recorded again. So it is always a pleasant (albeit rare) surprise if such a specimen reappears somewhere, as was the case recently with one that has apparently been hidden in plain sight for quite some time. On 26 August 2025, I was startled but delighted to learn from Florida resident and longstanding Facebook friend Adam Naworal that he had recently encountered a sample of tissue from the famous St Augustine globster. The sample was preserved and on public yet wholly unpublicised display in the map room at the St Augustine Historical Society – Oldest House Museum Complex – in Florida

As revealed in a photograph snapped of this remarkable specimen by Adam's wife Aimee and included here with her and Adam's kind permission, it consists of several chunks of whitened flesh preserved in fluid (formalin?) inside a large vertical glass jar, labelled and firmly stoppered. The St Augustine globster is – or was – the huge rotting carcase that washed ashore on a beach near St Augustine during November 1896. Eminent cephalopod (octopus/squid/cuttlefish) expert Prof. AE Verrill from Yale University deemed it to be the remains of a hitherto-unknown species of truly gigantic octopus, but since then there has been a long-running argument among scientists as to whether this is indeed what it was or whether, alternatively, it was simply the partial, highly-decomposed carcase of a whale, composed largely of blubber, and assuming an amorphous mass nowadays referred to as a globster. Samples were taken from it at the time, and analysed, yielding contentious, contradictory results, but most of these samples were thought to have been lost or discarded. So this confirmed example at the St Augustine Historical Society is of especial interest and scientific value, and now, thanks to keen-eyed Adam and Aimee, is duly recorded here for cryptozoological posterity.

Also, they have asked me to note here that they are making their photograph of this specimen freely available for all researchers to use at no charge, only a credit to Aimee is required – thanks guys! *Adam Naworal, personal communication, 26 Aug 2025.*

AN INFERNAL FIND

And staying with crypto-discoveries hidden in plain sight: Just two days before I learnt from Adam and Aimee about the St Augustine globster sample, another longstanding Facebook friend, Robert Schneck, had drawn my attention to an illustration that he'd lately discovered and had now uploaded to his Facebook page Historian of the Strange. Prepared by German artist Hermann Wöhler (1897-1961) in c.1930, it was an exceedingly detailed line drawing entitled "Inferno", depicting all manner of hideous monsters and other terrifying entities envisaged by him to be inhabiting Hell. But what had attracted Robert's particular attention was the creature depicted almost at the very centre of the illustration, because as he pointed out, it looked more than a little reminiscent of a certain alleged cryptid depicted in a notorious photograph during the early 1920s.

The cryptid in question was the so-called Loys's ape, reputedly encountered in the jungles on the border of Colombia and Venezuela by Swiss geologist Dr François de Loys while leading a party of explorers through this difficult, inhospitable terrain. The official narrative as provided by Loys was that they'd encountered two such creatures walking together on their hind legs and lacking tails. Threatened by them, the explorers shot one, the female, causing the male to flee. Taking the creature's lifeless carcase back to camp, they sat it on a crate, propped it upright with a long stick placed vertically beneath its chin, and photographed it. The carcase did not survive but the photo did, and for decades led to supposition that it portrayed one of the mysterious bipedal ape-like entities long reported from many different regions of South America, and inducing French/Swiss anthropologist Prof. George Montandon to formally dub their scientifically-undescribed species *Ameranthropoides loysi*.

Ultimately, however, long after Loys himself had died, one of his team's still-living members confessed that it had all been a hoax – the creature in the photo was nothing more than their pet spider monkey, which, after eventually dying, had been propped up and photographed to yield the famous, but now infamous, Loys's ape picture. Bearing in mind that Wöhler's illustration had been created no more than 10 years after Loys's photograph had first been published and had duly hit the headlines, it does indeed seem likely that this eyecatching image had directly inspired Wöhler to include a representation of it within his line drawing. For there is no doubt that the facial expression of Loys's ape as captured in the photo, with mouth agape and eyes staring widely, is certainly more than a little hellish, positively infernal, in fact! So, many thanks indeed to Robert for alerting me to a fascinating yet previously unrevealed and undocumented cryptozoological connection concealed within the art archives. *Robert Schneck, personal communication, 24 Aug 2025.*

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN presents his regular round-up of the weirdest news from across Europe

PIXSELL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE & BELOW: The statue of Melania Trump in Sevnica, Slovenia; now all that's left are the feet. **BELOW LEFT**: A sketch of the strange "apparition" seen by a witness in southern Germany that matched a pasive radar reading from the area.

BUT IS IT ART?

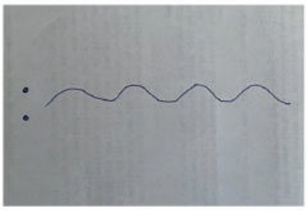
The most famous living immigrant to the United States, Melania Trump, née Melanija Knavs, was born in Novo Mesto in Slovenia in 1970. She spent her childhood in Sevnica where in 2020 the US concept artist Brad Downey and Slovenian artist Rok Pahor erected a life-sized bronze statue of her. It was the replica of an earlier wooden statue of the American first lady, also commissioned by Downey, which had become a victim of arson on 4 July 2020. On 13 May unknown art lovers (or art haters) sawed off Melania at the ankles, leaving only two feet on a pedestal. Police in Slovakia's capital Ljubljana say the have no idea who the vandals were. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 17 May 2025.*

PASSIVE RADAR TRACKS SKY PHENOMENON

According to Wikipedia, "Passive radar is a class of radar systems that detect and track objects by processing reflections from non-cooperative sources of illumination in the environment, such as commercial broadcast and communications signals." It is affordable to laymen, and so there is now a growing group of people interested in UFO phenomena that use passive radar to check on reported sightings. One of them is Josef Garcia from Friesenheim-Oberweier in southern Germany.

On 20 September 2024, at 5.34 am, a police employee in the town heard a sound like "a metal chain being dragged across the tarmac" and saw above her "an apparition in the form of a wave" with a "colon" in front. This visual experience lasted for some five seconds. Her husband, who was in the house, saw nothing but heard a noise "like so many pearls hitting on tiles". Josef Garcia, a neighbour who lives nearby, was indoors and heard nothing. When he learned of their experience and checked his own passive radar readings, he found these showed a wavy line with two small dots in front as well.

He found these showed a wavy line with two dots as well



Garcia stresses that his radar tracings show neither a plane nor a meteor as their traces look distinct, and could also not have been caused by a kite with a tail. He also says it is impossible to judge the direction, height, and distance of the object in his reading as this would require at least two more sets of passive radar sites in the vicinity. It is also unclear whether the radar detected three objects (the dots and the line) or only one.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Garcia thinks he recorded, and that his neighbours saw, "an unusual aerial phenomenon", even if it's not necessarily what most people think of when they hear the term 'UFO'. *Jufof 277, 1/2025; 279, 3/2025.*

GHOSTED

A building at Franklinstraße 20, in Hagen, Germany, had stood empty for some time. In May 2025 its new owners – Udo and Beate Findeisen and Sven Sokoll – visited on several nights and thought their new property might be haunted. "Sometimes there is a shuffling noise, sometimes it rattles," the *Westfalenpost* newspaper reported. There was no follow-up piece, and no other media carried the story, so these are the bare facts. However, when this article was posted on Facebook, Rene Krämer, a former owner of the building, had this to say: "We lived in the house about 13 years ago. Our dogs occasionally stared up at the ceiling in the corner of the children's room, but the really scary thing was the property management." *wp.de, 20 May 2025.*

WATER MONSTERS

This summer saw a fair number of crocodile sightings in European waters, although all were eventually revealed as hoaxes. On 1 April, a Verona newspaper published an image of a croc approaching the banks of Lake Garda at Torri del Benaco, Italy: its scaly head, body and tail were clearly visible above the surface. The picture had been sent in by a reader called Mario, who said it had been snapped by his grandson Giacomo. The paper identified the animal as an alligator, stressed that Louisiana red crayfish had also been photographed in Torri, and wondered if it had escaped a private owner – or, perhaps the best explanation of the image, it was "simply not an alligator, but a fish, the kind that emerges on April Fools' Day?" An April Fools' Day hoax is called a *pesce d'aprile*, or April fish, in Italian. *larena.it, 1 Apr 2025.*

Next came Lake Constance, the third largest body of water in central Europe. On 13 June, at 8 am, a walker alerted police and fire fighters after he spotted "a reptile-like creature" in a pond near the lake in the city of Constance, Germany. He had clearly identified the head of a crocodile, he said. When the fire brigade arrived, they could clearly see the head above the surface of the water. They had brought a cage and thick leather gloves, and used a long pole with a lasso attached to capture the animal around its neck. This worked perfectly and the brave firefighters dragged a plastic crocodile head attached to a stone to the shore. Similar croc heads have triggered police operations at several places in Germany in recent years. *tagesschau.de, 13 June 2025.*

BR24

LEFT: Tobias Spangler of Regensburg Police with a very small crocodile. **BELOW:** The mystery puma of Lake Gieseltal... probably a very small cat.

In mid-June, police were called to a street in Regensburg, Bavaria, after a walker informed them that a crocodile was sitting on the kerb. He attached a photo of the beast, but when the officers approached the animal they quickly found it was a 20cm (8in) plastic model – although it was "deceptively realistic looking", as a newspaper pointed out. "Police removed the crocodile quickly and without any precautionary measure, and its owner may collect it at the police station." *br.de, 23 June 2025.*

Then things got real. At the Brombachsee in Weißenburg County, Bavaria, at least five bathers were injured when a giant fish came and bit them on the legs on the afternoon of 20 June. Life guards tried to drive away the 2m (6.5ft) fish, but it kept returning. Police were called and closed the swimming area, but then decided to destroy the creature. One officer shot it three times, and it proved to be a 90kg (198lb) catfish. Biologists thought the fish only wanted to defend its spawn, which might have been deposited close to the bathing area. The fish drifted away and was later recovered by two anglers, while bathers returned. However, later accounts say the animal was not injured by the shots, just stunned, and that the anglers had caught it the conventional way. A catfish conspiracy? On the same day, papers reported that a second giant catfish had again attacked people at the Brombachsee. *General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 23 June; morgenpost.de, General-Anzeiger, 9 July 2025.*

NOT AS EASY AS ABC

Usually, summer is the time when people start to report alien big cats across Europe. A search of Spanish and Italian newspapers gave no results, but there was minor activity in Germany. On 16 June, police warned walkers at Braunsbedra near Lake Geiseltal in Saxony-Anhalt that visitors had filmed a puma close to a densely settled area. The animal was filmed from some distance, and members of the German Network for Cryptozoology warned that because of the perspective from which the footage was taken, the puma might have been far smaller than thought – and was probably just a common domestic cat. On 17 June, the cat was spotted and filmed for a second time, and now police could confirm the cryptozoologists' verdict that the creature was just a normal-sized moggy. *ntv, 16 June; netzwerk-kryptozoologie.de, 17 June 2025.*

Only a short time before, on 11 June 2025, a puma escaped his private owner at Sokolov in the Czech Republic. This animal was caught the next day by police in a nearby garden. It has not yet been decided whether the owner will have his pet returned or whether he will be banned from further keeping an 80kg (176lb) carnivore. *rtl.de, 25 June 2025.*

100 YEARS AGO

The *Paderborner Anzeiger* of 1 October 1925 carried a report about a case of dowsing from France:

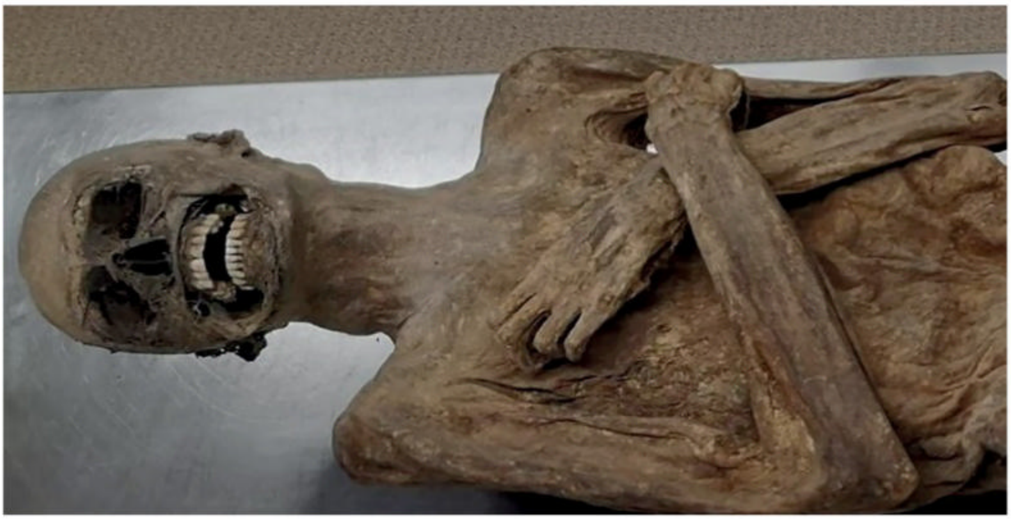
"A strange dowser. The interest of all of Paris is currently focused on a recently discovered 'occult phenomenon,' a dowser. He is a young man who is said to possess the ability to locate underground water sources with the help of a simple metal rod, and even to indicate the locations where drilling for petroleum might be successful. This 'occult' ability is not uncommon, and, as we know, there is more than one dowser here in Germany; the Paris case, however, is remarkable because the mysterious ability seems to be inherent in the young man to an extraordinary degree. Therefore, scholars, primarily psychiatrists, immediately took up the matter. The psychiatrist Crouset has set himself the task of subjecting the psychological basis of this astonishing talent to in-depth study and, above all, determining in which part of the brain the inexplicable ability is located. Such studies have been conducted in previous years, but no positive results have ever been reported."

COFFIN DODGERS

Austria's "air-dried chaplain", plus a skeleton in the attic, a Presley on ice and other strange cases of kept corpses

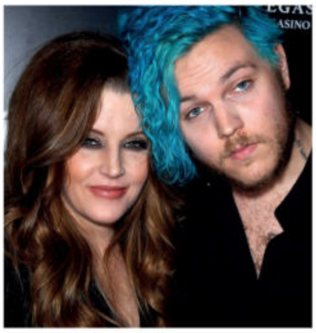
For centuries, a mysterious mummified body has been kept in the crypt of the church of St Thomas am Blasenstein in Upper Austria. Nicknamed "the air-dried chaplain" the body was believed to be the remains of an aristocratic former vicar, Franz Xaver Sidler von Rosenegg, who died in 1746 aged 37, probably of tuberculosis. No one was sure, though, exactly how von Rosenegg had been preserved as there was no evidence of any mummification process on the outside of the body. Now, a study by Dr Andreas Nerlich, a pathologist at Ludwig Maximilian University, in Munich, Germany, and his team has discovered how it was done. Nerlich found that the abdominal and pelvic cavities of the body had been packed with wood chips, broken twigs, zinc chloride and shredded fabrics, including pieces of hemp and silk, all of which would have soaked up body fluids and inhibited decay. He also worked out how these got inside the body, noting that: "The body wall was not opened – therefore the only entrance possible was the rectum." Carbon dating and close analysis of the body suggested that the traditional identification of the body as von Rosenegg was correct, as it was found to belong to a man between 35 and 45 years of age who died between 1734 and 1780 and who had led a comfortable life. Why he was embalmed remains a mystery; it was possibly to temporarily preserve him for transport to his home monastery of Waldhausen, although this never took place. "This is the first case with this type of documented embalming," Nerlich said, "so we have no idea how often or where this has been performed, although we assume that this type of 'short-term preservation' was used much more often than we might expect from this single case." *theguardian.com, 2 May 2025.*

ANDREAS NERLICH



ABOVE: The mysterious "air-dried chaplain" kept in the crypt of St Thomas am Blasenstein. **BELOW:** Lisa Marie Presley and her son Benjamin Keough, whose body was apparantly kept on ice in a spare room for two months.

There was no evidence of any mummification process



MEDIAPUNCH INC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

- In her memoir *From Here To the Great Unknown*, published posthumously, Lisa Marie Presley, daughter of Elvis and Priscilla Presley, described how she kept the body of her son, Benjamin Keough, in her spare room for two months, preserved in dry ice, after his death in 2020 at the age of 27. "I found a very empathic funeral home owner," Presley wrote. "She said, 'We'll bring Ben to you. You can have him there'," adding, "I think it would scare the living fucking piss out of anybody else to have their son there like that, but not me." Presley's daughter, actor Riley Keough, who completed the book after her mother's death, said that keeping Benjamin on ice at home gave the family "ample time to say goodbye to him", but admitted that the turning point came when she and her mother decided to get copies of one of Benjamin's tattoos. They invited the tattoo artist to her home to view the body close up in order to ensure the copies were accurate, and, Riley wrote, "Soon after that, we all kind of got this vibe from my brother that he didn't want his body in this house anymore." She added: "I've had an extremely absurd life, but this moment is in the top five." *huffingtonpost.co.uk, 9 Oct 2024.*

- In November 2024, a couple undertaking renovations on a property they had bought in Erstroff, France, close to the German border, ventured into the loft to look for a leak in the roof. There, hidden in a cubbyhole, they discovered "skeletal remains", believed to be those of the home's former owner, Aloïs Iffly, who had gone missing in 2009 at the age of 81 and had never been found, despite extensive searches. Prosecutor Olivier Glady said that a rope still hanging in the attic "hints at suicide", after which the body appears to have been concealed. Iffly's widow had remained living in the property until her own death in 2020, when it was sold to the latest owners. *BBC News, 5 Nov 2024.*

- Investigations into the 2023 disappearance of Anoushka Sites, 45, from Torquay in Devon, initially drew a blank, but as part of further inquiries in 2025, police searched the flat of her former partner Jamie Stevens, 51, who claimed he hadn't seen Sites since early 2022. "The officers who attended described the flat as being like that of a hoarder with rubbish, fæces and bottled urine scattered throughout the property," said prosecutor Hollie Gilbery, who went on to explain that "upon lifting a blanket in the living area officers discovered a skeletal arm and hand." They also "noticed there were various fragranced items scattered around the lounge, inferring they must have been to mask any smells." When arrested, Stevens admitted that in January 2023 Sites had appeared at his flat, asking if she could stay the night. He let her in, gave her the sofa to sleep on, and retired to his bedroom. The next day he went out early, leaving Sites apparently sleeping, and returned at 11.30pm, expecting her to have left, but found her dead. "He threw a blanket over her body and continued to live in his bedroom and never really returned to the lounge," said Gilbery. In court, she said of Stevens: "There is no reason on the basis of the post-mortem to doubt your account of having found Miss Sites dead in your address. It seems you completely wrongly panicked and simply covered her body. You left her there for years." *express.co.uk, 12 Aug 2025.*

- Waltham Forest Borough Council reviewed their safeguarding procedures after a woman in her 70s, given the pseudonym "Janet" was discovered pushing the corpse of her daughter, "Jodie", around a shopping centre in a wheelchair. Police officers had stopped Janet and discovered Jodie in a state of "heavy decomposition" in the chair, hidden under a red coat. The mother and daughter had shared a flat in Leyton, and when Jodie, who was in her 50s, died, Janet couldn't bear to be parted from her, so kept the corpse in her flat for more than a year. Despite the neighbours complaining about a bad smell and flies coming from the flat, no action had been taken by the council. "While this case is bizarre and extremely rare and hopefully will not happen again, it shows the need to provide support to individuals in these situations," said a council spokesperson. *BBC News, 5 Nov 2024.*

- When anyone enquired about her parents, Virginia McCullough, 36, told them that John, 70, and Lois, 71, had "moved to the seaside", lying repeatedly to neighbours and her parents' GP about their whereabouts. In fact, McCullough had poisoned her father, then stabbed her mother to death in June 2019 and was keeping their decomposing bodies in an upstairs bedroom of their house in Pump Hill, Chelmsford, Essex. McCullough continued to live in the property and neighbours described her, as "a little bit odd" and a "pest", as she would "suddenly appear for chats at 10pm". "You would get this story or other on what's happening to her and her world, most of it was just made up," one said, although he added, "We're all shocked – we didn't think she was capable of this." McCullough was eventually arrested when her parents' GP contacted the police after both Lois and John repeatedly missed scheduled medical appointments. As soon as they arrived at McCullough's house she admitted killing her parents, and showed officers their bodies. *dailymail.co.uk, 4 July 2024.*

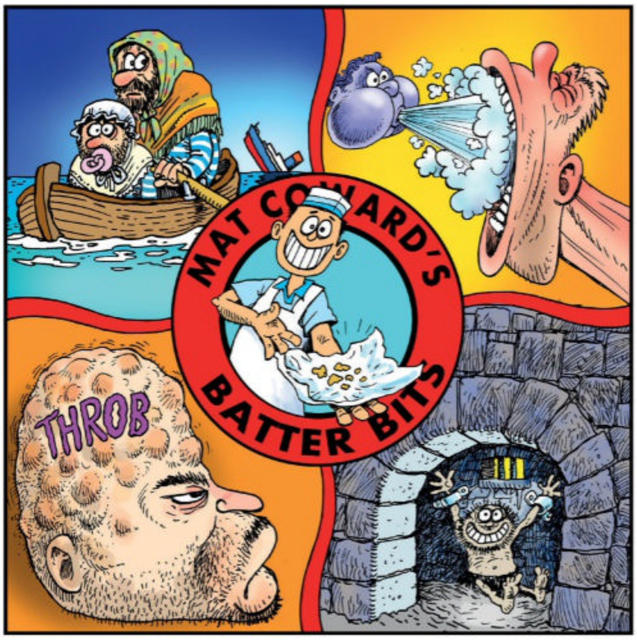
ESSEX POLICE

ABOVE: Virginia McCullough (top) and her parents.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

295: BITS, SCRAPS AND SCRUMPS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

Like the crunchy scraps of batter that loiter at the bottom of a chippy's deep fryer, Mythconception's filing system accrues fragments of myths. Considered individually they are not quite the whole potato, but since, for the sake of hygiene, every system should be cleaned once a decade whether it needs it or not, we present here a selection of such gribbles.Readers with anything to add to any of the topics briefly touched on are urged to wrap their thoughts in greaseproof paper and hand them in at the letters page.

- Speaking of batter bits, it seems that many fish-and-chip customers, plenty of chip-shop proprietors, and most of the nation's journalists believe that it is now illegal to serve them, due either to food safety or healthy eating concerns. Needless to say, this is nonsense: there is no law, regulation or official guidance preventing the supply or consumption of scrumps or screeds.

- "Women and children first" was never the general rule at sea, according to a study of shipwrecks. Researchers found that, in practice, men's survival rate was double that of women, with children faring even worse. As for "going down with the ship" - on average, a captain was more likely to survive than his passengers.

- Shouting into the wind is proverbially pointless, but scientifically very sensible. Academics in Finland found that, due to "convective amplification," sounds sent against the flow of air are louder; people can hear you better upwind than downwind. But it's harder to hear yourself; hence the myth, presumably.

- Human domination of Earth is often attributed to us having disproportionately large brains. But we haven't, scientists now say. Our brains are just as big as they should be for our body size.

Sources

www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/it-s-health-and-safety-gone-very-sensible-8430668.html; www.newscientist.com/article/dn22119-sinking-the-titanic-women-and-children-first-myth; www.snexplores.org/article/science-explains-shout-upwind-acoustics; www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/04/230424103343.htm; www.newscientist.com/article/mg20727711-300-size-isnt-everything-the-big-brain-myth

Don’t believe the hype!

NIGEL WATSON rounds up the latest news and views from the world of ufology

EXAGGERATION AND EXPECTATION

So many “bombshell” announcements about UFO revelations and secrets are made online that it gets exhausting. They pollute the subject and instead of encouraging further study they make people warier and more cynical about anything connected with ufology.

We are aware of many grifters and shysters who have ridden the UFO bandwagon for years – indeed, in some cases, decades. Only recently I’ve seen a cover for a CL-957 “government document” titled “CIA Series Vehicles” that has an illustration of a tic tac UFO and references to the Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Pratt and Whitney aerospace companies. Dodgy documents like this are in constant circulation.

But despite this, there always seems to be a roadblock to disclosure. As an example, former White House Director of Communication Anthony Scaramucci claims that when he tried to get information about UFOs he was told “It’s above the President’s security clearance.”

Then we have Republican Congresswoman Anna Paulina Luna, who is all in on UAPs and wacky theories. When working as an airfield manager at Portland Air National Guard base, pilots saw something that outperformed their F-15 jets but on questioning them she got the “I really can’t discuss it” answer. Despite being blocked in her enquires she boldly states that UAPs are operated by what “they call… interdimensional beings. I think that they can actually operate through the time spaces that we currently have. And that’s not something that I came up with on my own. That’s based on stuff that we’ve seen. That’s based on information that we’ve been told.” She goes on: “I can tell you, based on the photos that I’ve seen, I’m very confident that there’s things out there that have not been created by mankind.”

That seems to be the main mantra:”I’ve spoken to people, but I can’t tell you who they are or give any specific details about the information they have told me.” Another common thread is that supporters of disclosure claim to have seen photographs, films and documents that would blow the socks off your proverbial grey if released to the public. The smoking gun evidence is always “out there”… or residing in Area 51.

And then there are those who cry wolf, yet time after time they seem to get away with it, while their believers and followers faithfully lap up their ever-more ridiculous or outrageous claims.

CHRISTOPHER MICHEL / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

LEFT: Avi Loeb – overhyped claims?

SEARCHING FOR ALIEN TECH

The Harvard astrophysicist Avi Loeb has come under much closer scrutiny for his numerous overhyped claims about extraterrestrial technology; these usually gain wide publicity, but after the media storm has died down turn out not to be backed up by solid evidence or scientific analysis.

His first major claim was that the ‘Oumuamua interstellar object was an extraterrestrial solar wind sail. Two years later, in August 2019, another interstellar object, 2I/Borisov, was labelled by Avi as being a possibly artificial structure. In March 2023 Avi co-authored a paper titled “The Physical Constraints on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena” with Sean M Kirkpatrick, who was then head of the United States Department of Defense’s All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO). Their proposal was that there could be a large alien parentcraft in our Solar System sending out tiny “dandelion seed” probes towards the Earth.

A few months later, Avi launched an expedition to recover material from meteor CNEOS 2014-01-08 that might have been of interstellar origin and crashed to Earth on 8 January 2014 in the South Pacific, off the northern coast of Papua New Guinea. His $1.5-million expedition claimed to have recovered small metal spherules from the seabed that a team member said “reflect a highly differentiated, extremely evolved composition of currently unknown origin.” Critics argued that they were searching in the wrong area, that the speed of the meteor was over-estimated and the spherules were likely from a meteor that crashed into the ocean one million years ago.

In what proved to be a busy year for Avi, in November 2023 he suggested an advanced technological civilisation had caused a catastrophic global warming event 252 million years ago on Earth.

Avi’s current focus is on the approaching 31/Atlas interstellar object. Experts regard this as a comet, but not Avi. He says the light from it “isn’t coming from the Sun but could be from an onboard power source, such as a nuclear reactor.” He also contends that since it will pass Jupiter, Mars and Venus before exiting our Solar System it could be an AI-controlled device designed to deploy small probes as it does so.

In a YouTube podcast called “Professor Dave Explains”, Avi is labelled a fraud who has been spewing “horse shit” since 2017. Dave outlines the three steps of Avi’s playbook:

Step1: Make Outrageous claims in a paper.

Step 2: Use Harvard’s prestige to get coverage in the press.

Step 3: Play the victim of big bad Establishment science, when criticised.

Professor Dave Explains at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nYXIeZh_bw

OVERHYPED

In a paper called “Communicating astrobiology and the search for life elsewhere: Speculations and promises of a developing scientific field in newspapers, press releases and papers”, the researchers note that there is “considerable motivation for… institutions to inflate the impact and/or the scope of… research results they are promoting into the news” and that newspapers are likely to emphasise the more sensational aspects of the story.

They argue that: “Scientists, science communicators and science journalists play a crucial role in ensuring this kind of responsible communication. They should be mindful of the potential impact of their words and strive to present a realistic view of the field, avoiding unwarranted hype or sensationalism.”

Failing to meet expectations can be damaging to the credibility of institutions, but the authors admit that: “Science hype, the raising of expectations around the prospects of success of a field, can be a positive force by attracting the attention and inviting the contribution of the public and a plurality of societal actors to help shape the future direction of research.”

So Avi’s “horse shit” might be useful manure for advancing such studies if used with sufficient caution. *journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0328766*

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The Blossoming of Blackthorn Ritualistic Folk

Down a muddy track in deepest Herefordshire, by the tower of an isolated 17th century church, **LISA GLEDHILL** meets the painted and anonymous devotees of a very modern take on ancient ritual.

LEFT: Samhain 2024, Canon Frome Court, Ledbury. **FACING PAGE**: Samhain 2023, The Dragons Gate, Garway.

LISA GLEDHILL

In the borderlands, something is stirring. A current of eclectic neopaganism braided with folk music, performance art and countercultural fashion. From time to time when the stars align these currents burst forth in an efflorescence of creative expression, and one of those dark blossoms is Blackthorn Ritualistic Folk.

Blackthorn are more than just a Morris dance side, though they spring from the Dark Morris trend that has been steadily rising along the border between England and Wales since the 1990s.[1] They perform their rituals at dusk, primarily around the pagan festivals and turning points of the solar year. They wear costumes of tattered black, accented by the blue-purple colour of sloes, and they paint their faces in the same colour. Each member of the group takes a name from a totem plant or animal – such as Fox, Crow, Ivy or Moss – and images of their totem are incorporated into their costumes. The rituals use music, dance and flame combined with ceremony and directed group meditation to create an atmosphere more like an act of worship than a performance. It's their way of expressing shared beliefs and attuning to the cycles of the Earth, as group spokesman Blackthorn Bat explains:

“It's important to us to celebrate our connection to nature, to folk traditions and to each other and our wider community. We ground our performances in nature, folklore and local dark history, and celebrate these elements through different styles of dance, song, chanting, music and ceremony.

They perform their rituals around the pagan festivals and turning points of the solar year

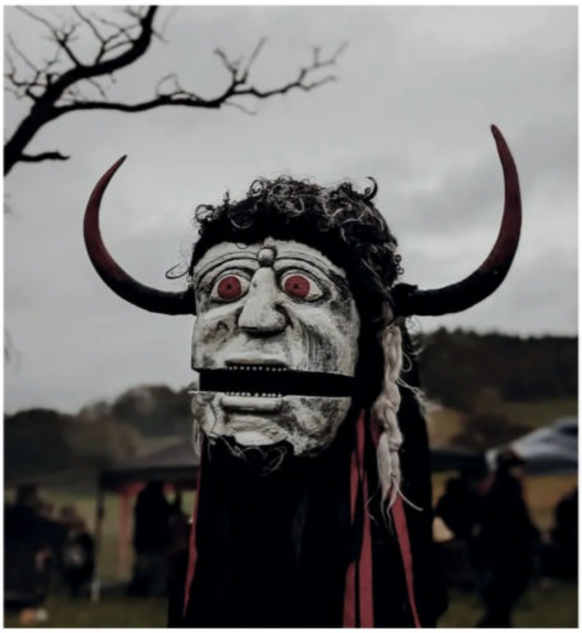
“We don't have a standard Morris band, in that we've got a mixture of modern and older instruments and have moved away from a traditional squeeze box sound. Some members of the side are interested in building unique and unusual instruments, and we've incorporated these into our performances too. We dance a mixture of original and traditional dances. Although we use some traditional Morris steps, patterns and tunes, we aren't bound by a code which can't be changed. All folk traditions change and evolve over time as they are influenced by the people who carry them on. Doing this successfully means keeping a foot in the past and trying to acknowledge where a tradition came from whilst simultaneously skipping off into the future.”

Unlike many other folk dance collectives, Blackthorn avoid the big folk festivals and public town-centre events. Instead, their rituals are usually held in smaller places around Herefordshire, for ticket holders or invited guests, although they do support some charity events. They also hold a small number of ‘cryptic’ rituals which anyone can attend for free – but only if you can solve a puzzle to work out when and where they will be dancing.

“We usually dance in rural areas where there's a history of people working the land on or near to local historical sites,” says Blackthorn Bat. “We honour a connection to the past and choose sites that reflect this. Choosing rural or remote sites can

INSTAGRAM/FOLK.RIGHT.OFF

LISA GLEDHILL



INSTAGRAM/FOLK.RIGHT.OFF

ABOVE LEFT: Samhain 2024, Canon Frome Court, Ledbury. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The Darkest Ooser, Samhain 2023, The Dragons Gate, Garway. **BELOW**: Imbolc 2024, Clearwell Caves, Forest of Dean.

present a challenge in terms of making sure our performances are accessible, and this is something that we're mindful of when choosing locations. Our hope is that by offering different types of gatherings at different times of the year, as many people as possible can experience the magic of dancing, music and song which would have once been an integral part of every community."

Blackthorn was formed on a full moon in 2019 and currently has around 50 members, both men and women, including a few young "Thornlings" in training to be the next generation of performers. Their standard of music and singing is very high, which is sadly not always the case with amateur folk dance groups. Their dances have developed from the Border Morris tradition which, for anyone not up to speed with their Morris-knowledge, is usually known as 'the one with the sticks', as opposed to Cotswold Morris, 'the one with the hankies'. Border Morris has a reputation for being louder, fiercer and more uninhibited than the Cotswold style. The father of the 20th century folk-dance revival, Cecil Sharp, described Border Morris as "decadent", which is just one of its many attractions. Blackthorn's dances are also influenced by the folklore, nature or history of the places where they are performed. The dancers weave symbolism into their movements to help tell the story, as Blackthorn Bat describes:

"One of our dances, *Black Nag*, is based on an old English dance which we've adapted into a Border style, based on a local pub where horse skulls were discovered nailed under the floorboards. One theory is that they were placed there to make the dance floor more resonant – or possibly it was something more sinister."

"Our dance *Green Man* honours the stone carving on Kilpeck church. Dancers form an arch like the mouth of the green man while other dancers move through it like the foliage coming out of its mouth. *Hares of Much Marcle* we dance in three sets, which symbolises the three hares, [2] and the local folk tale which supports the dance is of witches in Much Marcle turning into hares to confuse foxhounds and lead them astray. *Hanging Judge* is about Judge Jeffreys who sentenced more than 180 people to death by hanging from an oak beam in the Skirrid Mountain Inn at Llanvihangel Crucorney, Monmouthshire, which was once a courthouse. The dancers make the shape of a noose as they dance."

> "Dancers form an arch like the mouth of the green man while other dancers move through it"

Just as the group embraces creativity in music and movement, they're happy to embrace creative mythology too. Bat continues: "*Twiggy Witch* is based on a Herefordshire folk character invented by Whinny Moor, who produce short 1970s style documentaries based on British cryptids and mock TV series including soundtracks and TV listings (see **FT410:65, 419:57**). Watching

EDEN TANNER PHOTOGRAPHY

COURTESY BLACKTHORN RITUALISTIC FOLK

ABOVE: Wassail 2025, Newton Court, Leominster. **BELOW**: Samhain 2024, Canon Frome Court, Ledbury.

the cryptids video about Herefordshire's Twiggy Witch inspired us to make a dance to celebrate it, and now people watch that dance and believe that the Twiggy Witch is in fact an old tale. All folklore is created that way – someone told a story and it got passed on and on. We're carrying on that tradition."

Lots of folk dance groups have an animal mascot, often a horse, but Blackthorn are exceptional in having a whole stable of fantastical beasts. The beasts take part in processions and rituals and move among the audience at their events, causing laughter and terror in more or less equal quantities. There's a Green Man based on a carving at Kilpeck Church, a horse skull headed Winterfylleth similar to the Welsh Mari Llwd, and Black Vaughan, inspired by an evil squire from Herefordshire whose ghost appears as a terrifying black bull. Most striking of the bunch is The Darkest Ooser, a horned and bearded figure similar to the Dorset Ooser, that poster-boy for the 21st century resurgence of interest in British folklore (see **FT427:28-35**). The Darkest Ooser can be seen in all his glory – along with the rest of Blackthorn Ritualistic Folk – in the music video for *Hunters in the Sky* by occult rock band Green Lung.

A documentary about Blackthorn Ritualistic Folk is currently in production but the best way to experience their special blend of magic is to attend one of their rituals – assuming you can find one.

LISA GLEDHILL

You can pick up clues on their website at **www.blackthornritualisticfolk.co.uk** and regular updates are posted on their social media feeds at **www.instagram.com/blackthorn.ritualisticfolk** and **www.facebook.com/blackthorn-ritualistic-folk-group**.

LISA GLEDHILL is a writer and film maker and a regular contributor to FT. She'd like to thank Blackthorn Bat and Blackthorn Toad for their help in compiling this feature.

NOTES

1 For an overview of the growth of Dark Morris and its links to Goth, Steampunk, Heavy Metal and the work of Terry Pratchett, see https://www.morrisfed.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-History-and-Development-of-Dark-Border-Morris.pdf by Dr Chloe Middleton-Metcalfe.

2 The three hares design, also known as 'tinners rabbits' is a decorative motif showing three rabbits chasing in a circle, with their ears overlapping. It's found in several churches in Devon and appears throughout the UK, mainland Europe and Asia, usually in religious or mystical contexts. Tinners Rabbits is also the name of a traditional order Morris dance.

HAUNTED ESSEX

THE GRAVEYARD OF WITCHES

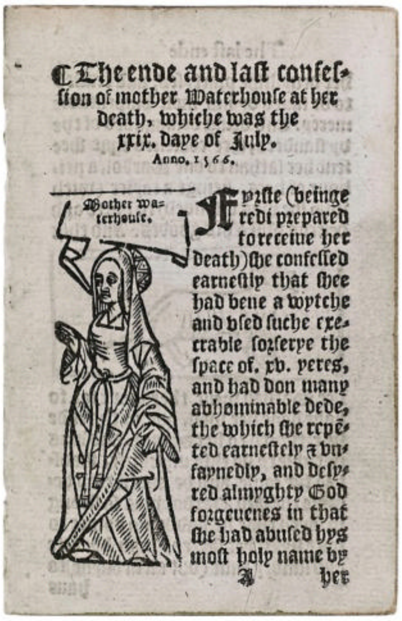
The county of Essex witnessed some of the most notorious witch trials in England and the executions of many women and men accused of consorting with the Devil or bewitching their neighbours. Nearly every village has its own story to tell, says REBECCA BATLEY, and many of them appear to be haunted by the victims of the witch hunts...

Essex: A county bounded by water, flat, marshy and called by some the "graveyard of witches". Between 1500 and 1800 over 1,000 men, women and children were executed for the crime of witchcraft in the county, more than in any other part of the country. Larger than life figures such as the infamous witchfinder Matthew Hopkins stalk the folklore of Essex and those executed as witches are said to haunt almost every corner of the county, from the shadowy towers at Mistley to the cage in St Osyth, to Canewden village. From Arlesford to the hill of Halstead no corner of the county is bereft of a 'witch.'

UNIVERSAL ART ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

WITCHFINDERS

The first of the Essex witchcraft trials took place in Chelmsford on 25 and 26 July 1566, where three women – Elizabeth Francis, Agnes Waterhouse and Joan Waterhouse – were accused of being witches in their village of Hatfield Peverel. They were accused, among other things, of practising witchcraft from childhood, of keeping a familiar in the form of a cat called Satan and of manipulating people to their will. Elizabeth in particular stood accused of making a deal with Satan in order to marry a wealthy young man named Andrew Byles; when he would not marry her, she ruined him and caused his death. She later became pregnant by a man called Francis, but ordered her familiar to kill her daughter and make Francis lame when he mistreated her. Agnes, meanwhile, confessed under torture that she had used her witchcraft to commit "abominable deeds". She was found guilty and hanged, making her the first recorded woman to die as a witch in Essex. Elizabeth would later join her, but Joan, Agnes's daughter, was acquitted; possibly Agnes's confession was made on the understanding that Joan would be spared. Such a display of maternal devotion is said to have left its mark down the centuries, as the two women have been spied many times walking the lanes together: two ghostly figures singing to themselves as they slip from sight.



¶The ende and laſt confeſſion of mother Waterhouſe at her death, whiche was the xxix. daye of July.
Anno. 1566.

Mother Waterhouſe.

Fyrſte (beinge redi prepared to receiue her death) ſhe confeſſed earneſtly that ſhee had bene a wytche and vſed ſuche execrable ſorſerye the ſpace of. xv. yeres, and had don many abhominable dede, the which ſhe repēted earneſtely & vnfaynedly, and deſyred almyghty God forgeuenes in that ſhe had abuſed hys moſt holy name by

A her

THREE WOMEN WERE ACCUSED OF BEING WITCHES IN THE VILLAGE OF HATFIELD PEVEREL

LEFT: Agnes Waterhouse was tried in Chelmsford in 1566 and was one of the first women executed for witchcraft in England. Woodcut from "The examination and confession of certaine Wytches at Chensforde..." by John Phillips. **FACING PAGE**: The Essex village of Mistley

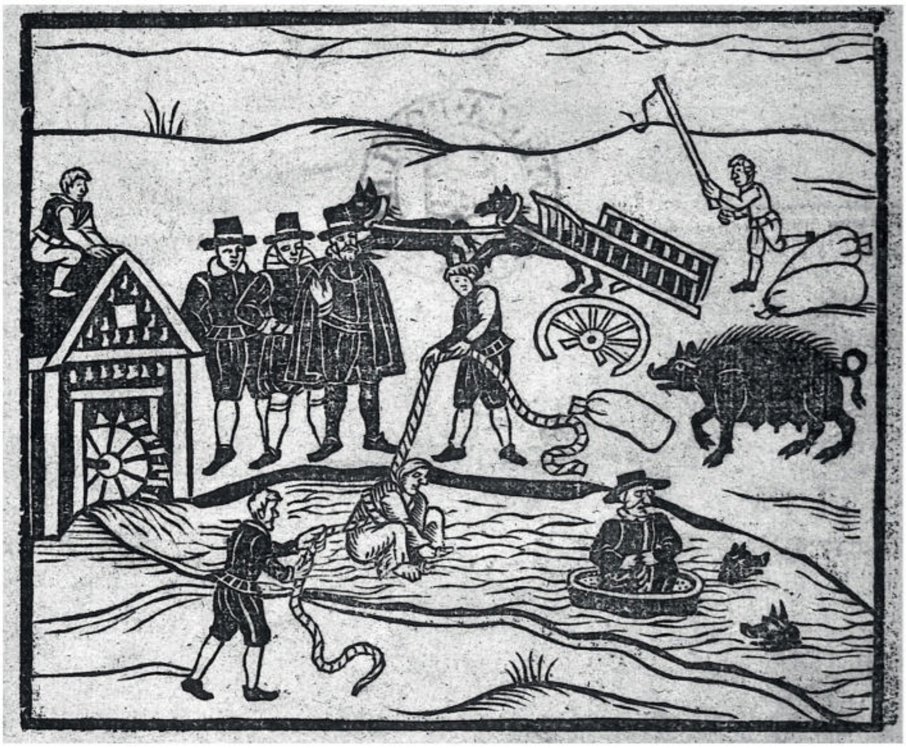
The most famous women convicted of witchcraft in Essex today are arguably those whose 'investigations' were led by the 'Witchfinder General', Matthew Hopkins (see **FT198:30-36, 367:32-39**). Hopkins was born in Essex in the early 17th century, at a time when many people had a very real fear of witches. King James I was obsessed with witches and how to catch them. He had published a book on the subject in 1597 called *Daemonologie* and as King of Scotland, prior to his accession to the English throne, he had pursued witches relentlessly, fearing that they were plotting to kill him. He was right to be afraid, but the threat to his rule did not come from witches.

On the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, James found himself King of England, and his passion for the occult soon filtered down into English society. He convinced the hitherto sceptical English Parliament to rule, in 1604, that witchcraft should be a crime punishable by death. It was into this atmosphere that Matthew Hopkins was likely born some time in around 1620. His early life remains a mystery, but in 1644 he stepped out of the shadows when a friend of his, John Stearne, accused a group of women from Manningtree in Essex of trying to kill him by means of sorcery. Hopkins enthusiastically supported Stearne and participated in investigations which saw the women searched for blemishes or 'Devil's marks,' deprived of sleep and questioned endlessly.

Hopkins is thought to have been an impoverished lawyer, but one thing is certain: he saw it as his job to ensure that

CLYNT GARNHAM / STOCKIMO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

MISTLEY
Mistley Towers

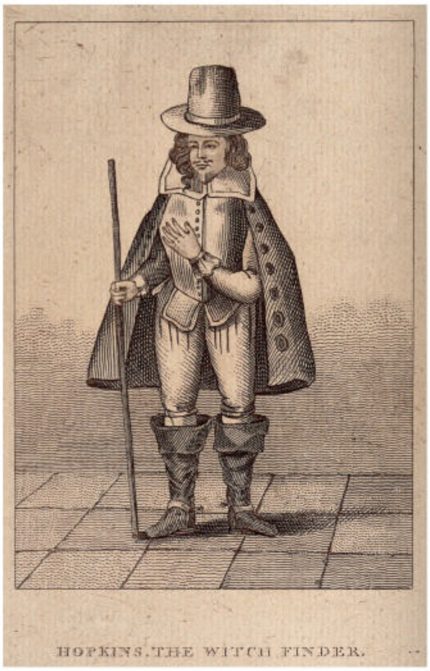


anyone carrying out the work of the Devil must be destroyed. Stearne and Hopkins accused no less than 23 women of witchcraft, specifically of having had meetings with the Devil. It is said that Hopkins and Stearne met with other locals at the White Hart inn to plot their accusations.

Accusing someone of witchcraft was not quite as simple as we might today suppose. The 'accuser' would have to contact the local Justice of the Peace, and he would then begin an investigation. In this case, the Justice asked Stearne and Hopkins to undertake the investigation and to gather evidence, which they did, enthusiastically. Many were willing to speak out against the accused, either from genuine belief or fear. Ninteen of the women accused, despite protesting their innocence, were tried at Chelmsford and would later be hanged, the remainder died in prison.

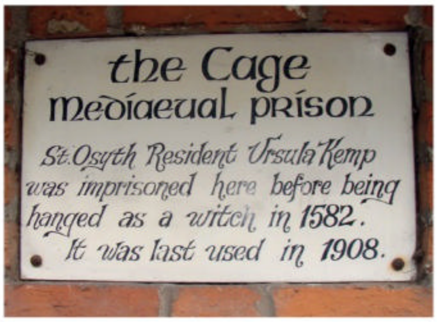
The following year Hopkins assumed what appears to have been the self-appointed title of Witchfinder General and he undertook a number of investigations into witchcraft in Essex. Just down the road from Manningtree, where today the eerie towers of Mistley stand, Hopkins investigate an accusation of witchcraft against Anne Leach, a widow who was ultimately condemned to hang on 17 July 1645. She had, Hopkins claimed, bewitched the infant son of John and Susan Edward and brought about his death. She was said to be working alongside other women from Manningtree, and today locals claim that she is seen regularly walking by the towers. A simultaneous investigation by Hopkins led to the condemnation of four women – Helen Clark, Anne Cooper, Marian Hocket and Anne West – who were hanged for witchcraft on Manningtree village green on 18 July 1645. The surviving records of their trial and condemnation at Chelmsford, where they were moved after a period of imprisonment in Colchester Castle, show just how deeply the fear of witchcraft had taken root in the local area with Hopkins walking the lanes. In total, 107 people testified against them.

HOPKINS CONTINUED HIS INVESTIGATIONS UNTIL HIS PREMATURE DEATH IN 1647 IN MANNINGTREE


HOPKINS, THE WITCH FINDER.

WELLCOME COLLECTION

LEFT: 'Swimming' witches, as carried out at the Gamekeeper's Pond in Mistley. **BELOW LEFT**: Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins undertook many of his investigations in Essex. **BELOW**: A sign on the wall of The Cage in St Osyth.

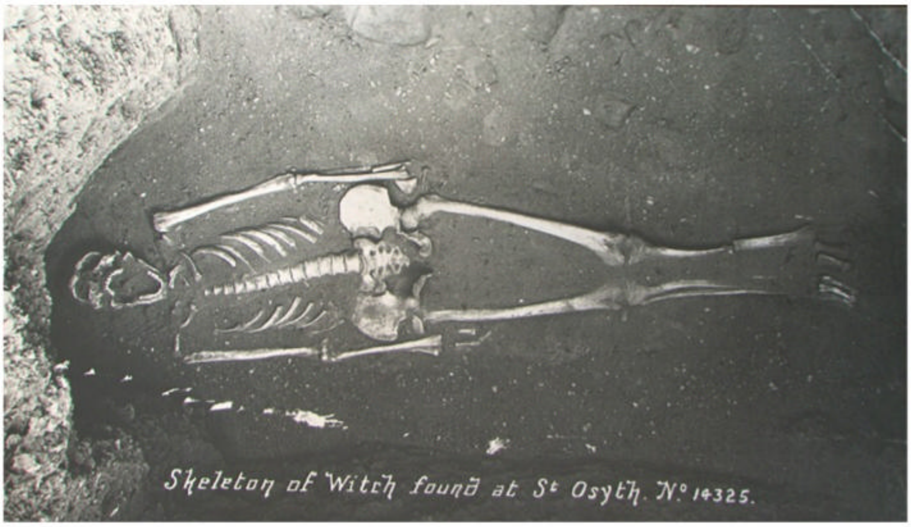

the Cage
Mediaeval prison
St.Osyth Resident Ursula Kemp
was imprisoned here before being
hanged as a witch in 1582.
It was last used in 1908.

Hopkins continued his investigations until his own premature death in 1647 in Manningtree. He was buried in the graveyard of the Church of St Mary. His ghost is said to haunt the Gamekeeper's Pond in Mistley. Today, the pond is a pleasant spot for a picnic or a stroll through the wooded landscape, but in the 17th century this is where the Witchfinder's practice of 'swimming' took place, whereby if the accused floated this was thought to be proof of their guilt; innocent women sank to the bottom. As for the witches themselves, they are said to have been glimpsed here too, perhaps trapped at the scene of their torture, or perhaps seeking to enact some sort of revenge upon the man who helped to condemn them.

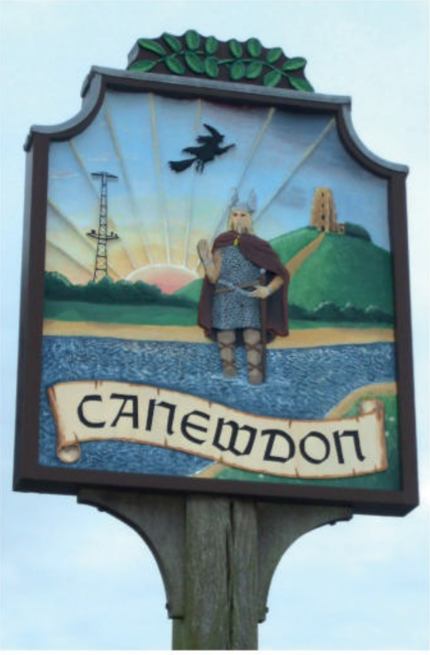
THE CAGE

Possibly the most terrifying witch of Essex has been seen repeatedly in St Osyth. For centuries, people say, the name of Ursula Kempe when said aloud has had people crossing themselves in fear. Kempe lived in St Osyth, a peaceful, coastal Essex village which was dominated by its priory up until the Reformation. Post-Reformation, at the time Kempe was living there, it had faded into obscurity; but it seems that the religious and moral ambiguity that followed the end of Catholicism in England had left a void, one that needed to be filled.

Kempe was known in the village as an experienced midwife and as someone who knew how to heal the sick – today we would likely call her a herbal healer or medicine woman. Ursula was first accused of witchcraft by her friend and neighbour Grace Thurlowe after the two had a quarrel. The trial records tell us that when Grace's son Davy/David fell ill she went to Ursula for help. Ursula healed him with the help of spells or incantations. Grace then decided that she did not want Ursula to be nursemaid to her baby daughter Joan, a position which she had previously offered Ursula it seems. That might have been the end of the matter – a mere neighbourly quarrel no doubt forgotten by Michaelmas – had it not been for the fact that soon afterwards Joan fell from her crib and died. Despite this, Grace still sought Ursula's



ABOVE LEFT: The Cage, St Osyth, continues to attract ghost hunters. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A skeleton popularly believed to be that of Ursula Kempe, the notorious witch of St Osyth. **BELOW**: The village sign of Canewdon, the church, a Viking, the former radar tower and one of the six witches flying overhead on a broomstick.



TERRYJOYCE / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

help when she began to suffer with joint pain, and again Ursula came to her aid and Grace's pain went away. However, she now refused to pay Ursula for her help, saying she could not afford it. Ursula stopped giving her the treatment, which seems to have been some sort of balm, and naturally the pain returned. An angry Grace now went to the local authorities and accused Ursula of causing her pain, making her son unwell and, most damningly, of having killed her young daughter in revenge. Soon, further accusations began to surface as Kempe was made a scapegoat for various local incidents; she was accused of causing the death of Elizabeth Leatherdale after she had quarrelled with her mother and refused to lend her free of charge certain materials which she had asked to borrow. Ursula was said to have muttered a spell that caused Elizabeth's death "by bewitchment."

Worse was soon to come as others spoke out. She was accused of having four familiars, a lamb, two cats and a toad, who it was said helped her to kill. The fact that she had also borne an illegitimate son, Thomas, did not help her cause. The man overseeing her trial, Justice Brian Darcy, later claimed that Ursula Kempe made a full confession to him and implicated other women, including one Elizabeth Bennett, who would eventually share her fate.

After her arrest Ursula Kempe was held at a village jail called 'The Cage' in St Osyth in 1582 before her execution in Chelmsford where she and Elizabeth were hanged. Soon after her death strange happenings were reported, and to this day 'The Cage', now a private dwelling, remains the focus of many a ghost hunt (see **FT293:16-17, 327:34-37**). The kitchen is described as freezing, electromagnetic field meters switch to 'orange' upon entering the building (said to indicate a high level of paranormal activity) and investigators report seeing objects moving or smashing for no reason. Some claim that Ursula's spirit is responsible, and numerous people claim to have seen her ghostly figure at the window or moving through the rooms. She is described as tall, thin, with long hair, sometimes looking peaceful, sometimes vengeful. The volume of paranormal activity there has earned 'The Cage' the title of "the most haunted house" in Essex. The most recent owner reported so many strange happenings that she felt forced to move out, fearing for her safety.

THE SIX WITCHES

Let's now move to Canewdon, a small village on the Crouch estuary, where no less than six witches are still said to take to the skies. The village is surrounded by mudflats and marshes, and was relatively isolated until the post-industrial period; even today, it has a desolate and unsettling quiet about it. By tradition the village is home to six witches, and will be for as long as the church tower of St Nicholas, which still dominates the skyline, stands. Every time a stone falls from the tower, it is said, a witch will die – and then be replaced by another. The noise of them flying over the church on their broomsticks has been regularly heard throughout the centuries.

In the late 1500s Canewdon was the scene of three witchcraft trials. In 1580 a woman by the name of Rose Pye, spinster, was accused of killing one-year-old Johanna Snow at Scaldhurt Farm. The cause of death was given as "bewitchment". Pye was eventually found not guilty, largely because it seems that few local people were willing to testify against her, but she died in jail anyway because she could not afford to pay the fee for her release. Five years later, Cecily Makyn was also accused of witchcraft and of having a familiar, but although she was found guilty she was not sentenced to death but rather given five years to mend her ways and live a good Christian life. The last trial came 10 years after the first, and saw Cecily again accused of being a witch; again, she was found guilty, and again her sentence was not death. This time, she was excommunicated by the Church – a severe punishment in Tudor England, but one that was surely preferable to death. Why the women were spared has long puzzled historians; it is also strange that decades later Matthew Hopkins avoided Canewdon, even though he was actively witch hunting in villages just a few miles away.

Another strange incident in the village concerning witchcraft involved a 'cunning man' called James Murrell who was born in 1780, said to be the seventh son of a seventh son. He was summoned, it is said, to Canewdon by a witch who wanted to challenge him to see who was the most powerful. He duly came and the witch was defeated and fell down. The villagers later called him again in order to force out the witches in their midst, who they said could be seen regularly dancing around the churchyard. However, the vicar, one Reverend William Atkinson, refused Murrell's help, fearing that he would unmask

TIMOTHY SMITH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The marshes around Canewdon, an area of "desolate and unsettling quiet". **BELOW**: Candewdon's modern-day 'cunning man', George Pickingill, who claimed to be the oldest man in England. He was said to have sold his soul to the Devil and to be the master of the Canewdon witches.

his own wife as one of the witches.

Mary Ann Arkinson and her sister Elizabeth Lodwick are noted in several books as having been witches. Elizabeth had married well to Jeremiah Lodwick, who was the Lord of Lambourn Hall in Canewdon, but after only 15 months of marriage he had dropped dead leaving her a rich widow and she never remarried, preferring instead to manage what were now her estates for over 30 years (1826-1861). She was accused several times of witchcraft, but no charges were ever brought. It is said that she and her sister can still be seen dancing around the churchyard on both a full Moon and on the anniversary of her husband's death.

Just after Elizabeth's death, another witch is said to have moved to the village, maintaining the presence of the six. This was a farm labourer and 'cunning man' by the name of George Pickingill, who it was claimed could control animals and worked alongside a group of impish familiars in order to get an impossible amount of work done in a short time; he also claimed (falsely) to be the oldest man in England. Locals said that he could hurt or heal as he saw fit. Such was his power that a legend arose that he was the master of the witches in the village and could summon them by using a wooden whistle.

The writer Charles Lefebure (author of less-than-reliable paperback originals like *Witness to Witchcraft*, 1970) later inflated this claim, stating that Pickingill had sold his soul to the Devil and that Canewdon became a meeting places for witches from all over Europe, who danced and engaged in unnatural practices in the churchyard. According to WE Liddel's book *The Pickingill Papers*, a treatise on the nature of Wicca and local folklore, Pickingill was in fact the forgotten founder father of modern witchcraft, influencing the evolution of Gardnerian Wicca and much more – although Wiccans apparently avoid Pickingill's practices because of their dark, Satanic side.

HE COULD CONTROL ANIMALS AND WORKED ALONGSIDE A GROUP OF IMPISH FAMILIARS

Pickingill, it seems, does not rest peacefully either. Some claimed to have met him on the roads about the village, either as an old man or as a rabbit, in which guise he once outwitted a young vicar who sought to catch and whip him for his heresy.

HALLOWE'EN WITCHES

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the Canewdon's association with witches, there are numerous legends as to how one can summon them. If you walk around the church tower at midnight, you must dance with the witches before you will be allowed to leave; if you run around the tower three times backwards, the ghosts of the village witches will appear at the top of the tower; or if you walk around it seven times on Hallowe'en, you will see a witch who may or may not grant you a favour, depending on her mood.

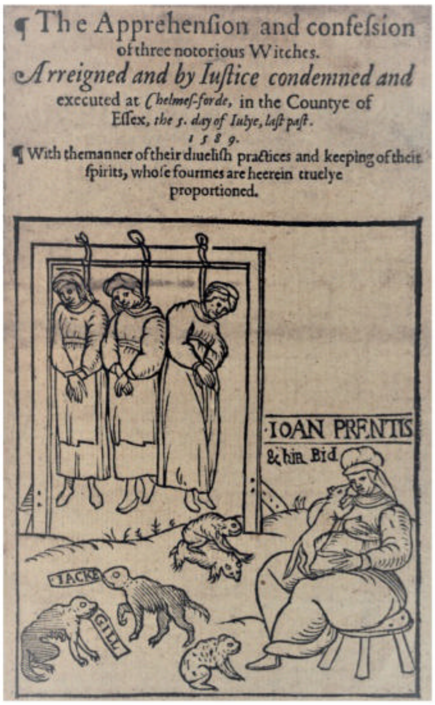
The Devil, meanwhile, can be summoned by either asking a wise woman for 'George' or running around the Tower anti-clockwise

CALLUM REDGRAVE-CLOSE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The Gamekeeper's Pond at Mistely, said to be haunted by the ghost of Matthew Hopkins, the scourge of Essex's witches. **BELOW**: "The apprehension and confession of three notorious witches... condemned and executed at Chelmes-forde" – Joan Cunny, Joan Upney and Joan Prentice.

on Hallowe'en. So many people turned up on one Hallowe'en to test these prophecies that the police set up a cordon around the church, something that still periodically occurs to this day.

Another ghostly witch said to haunt Essex on Hallowe'en is Joan Cunny of Stisted, who in 1589 was accused of bewitching her neighbours, causing a storm and of using familiars called Jack and Jill to terrorise her fellow villagers. Her own children and grandchildren gave evidence against her at her trial, and after torture Joan confessed that she had learnt how to summon the Devil from another witch, Mother Humfrey, by creating a circle and kneeling inside and whispering incantations. Joan was taken out and immediately hanged after her trial, after which suspicion fell upon her daughters. Margaret Cunny was arrested and at the Chelmsford Assizes on 5 July 1589 was accused of bewitching one John Gwain and causing him to lose his eye. Her sister Avice Cunny was accused alongside her of using "witchcraft, enchantments, charms and sorceries" which she had used to bring about the lameness and death of Richard Frank. Margaret was imprisoned and sent to the pillory, while Alice was sentenced to death but escaped by pleading her belly. Possibly the sisters were spared for having spoken so openly against their mother. Today, the thump of a lame leg is said to be heard in the lanes of Stisted, testament to the power of the witches who once lived there.



¶ The Apprehenſion and confeſsion
of three notorious Witches.
Arreigned and by Iuſtice condemned and
executed at *Chelmeſ-forde*, in the Countye of
Eſſex, *the 5. day of Iulye, laſt paſt.*
1589.
¶ With the manner of their diueliſh practices and keeping of their
ſpirits, whoſe fournes are heerein truelye
proportioned.

IOAN PRENTIS
& hir Bid
IACKE
GILL

A LEGACY OF PERSECUTION

Almost every village in Essex has a similar story. One of the most tragic relates to the bucolic village of Great Dunmow where Alice Prestmarye was accused of bewitching Edward Parker, son of the local tanner, and putting him in peril of his life. Alice was arrested and sent to Colchester Castle where she was imprisoned. She was brought up before the assizes in Brentwood where she was found guilty of bewitching two cows and three calves. Her husband hanged himself before he could be forced to give evidence against Alice, devastating her and the whole family, as well as committing a mortal sin in the eyes of the church. Joan Pretmary, likely a relation, and her husband Richard were later indicted for witchcraft also and found guilty at the Chelmsford Assizes in 1579. They were both hanged, and Alice's screams are still said to be heard centuries later.

The County of Essex persecuted and hanged around 60 per cent of all the 'witches' in England. It is an extraordinarily high number, fuelled by the work and legend of Matthew Hopkins as well as the isolation of many Essex villages – the perfect atmosphere for fear and paranoia to breed. Is it any wonder, then, with such a legacy of persecution and death that so many of these women still haunt the roads and lanes of Essex? Perhaps they are seeking vengeance; perhaps they are seeking the peace they were denied in life; or perhaps they just want to be seen, and to have their stories told.

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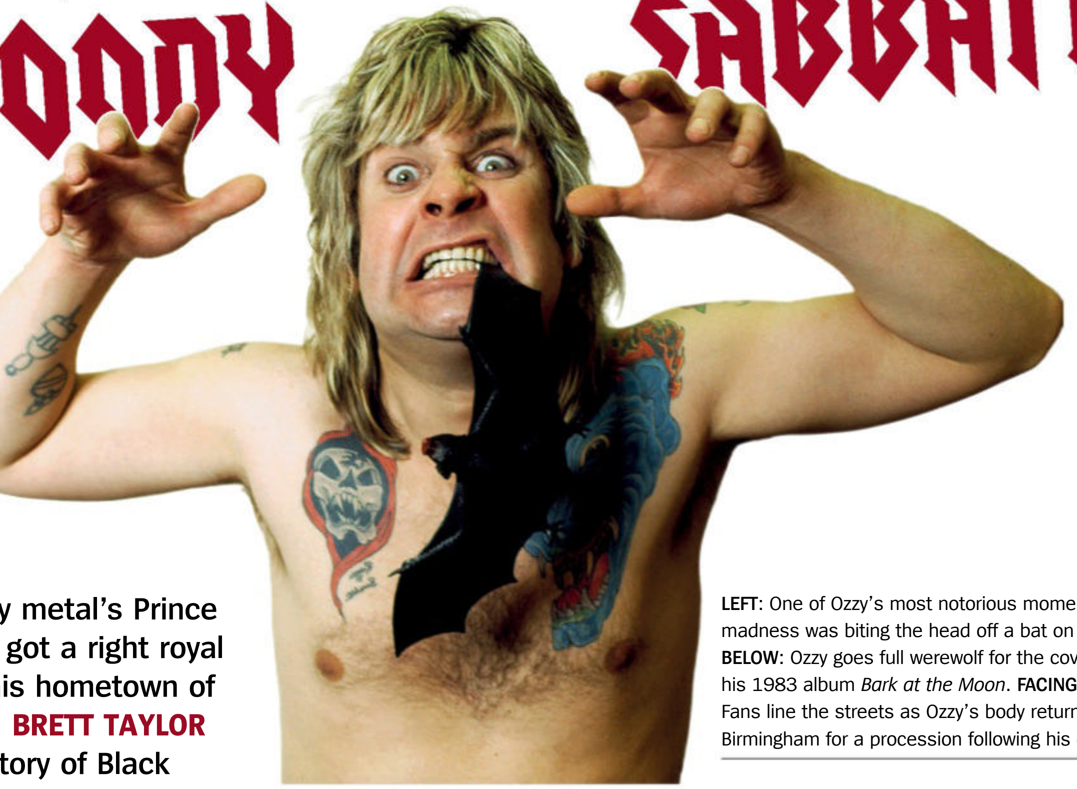
SABBATH. BLOODY SABBATH

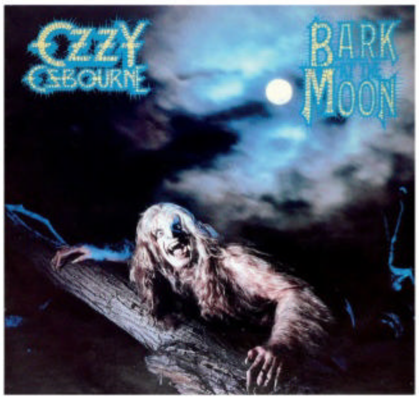


In July, heavy metal's Prince of Darkness got a right royal send-off in his hometown of Birmingham. **BRETT TAYLOR** traces the story of Black Sabbath's occult dabblings, from Tony Iommi's astral travels to Ozzy Osbourne's Satanic panics...

MEDIAPUNCH INC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: One of Ozzy's most notorious moments of madness was biting the head off a bat on stage. **BELOW**: Ozzy goes full werewolf for the cover of his 1983 album *Bark at the Moon*. **FACING PAGE**: Fans line the streets as Ozzy's body returns to Birmingham for a procession following his death.

OZZY EXPLAINED THAT HIS SATANIC BUFFOONERY WAS JUST A BIT OF HARMLESS ROLE-PLAYING



PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

At the end of July, thousands of fans gathered for Ozzy Osbourne's funeral procession in Birmingham. Some of them shouted "Ozzy forever!" The hard rock singer died 22 July 2025 at the age of 76.[1]

After a procession like that, it's perhaps hard to remember just how reviled the singer was in certain quarters just a few decades ago at the height of the "Satanic Panic" hysteria of the eighties. It was a period when Ozzy's reputation reached its nadir.

DIARY OF A MADMAN

Tabloid trash host Geraldo Rivera hosted *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*, which aired on 25 October 1988 on the NBC Network. Geraldo interviewed Ozzy thanks to a video monitor in his studio, getting things off to a rocky start with the claim that "every single kid… who committed a violent act in Satan's name was also into heavy metal music." But the singer remained calm as he explained,:"All I do is make music.I don't set down and purposely plan to freak everybody out… Not all my songs are about Satanism." Candidly, the singer admitted: "I feel persecuted."

The trash king had regrettably little time for Ozzy, who was sandwiched between James LeBar, an NYC Archdiocese exorcist later accused of sexual abuse of a minor, and Sean Sellers, the youngest killer to be sentenced to Death Row in Oklahoma.[2]

Elsewhere, Ozzy lamented to the *LA Times*, "At first, all this Satanic business was funny. It brought me a lot of publicity when I needed it. But it has become like a nightmare."

The incident that gave Osbourne his biggest boost in notoriety had been in 1982, when a fan in the audience at a show in Des Moines, Iowa, tossed an object onstage, which the singer assumed to be a rubber bird. Ozzy thought it would be a laugh to play along with the gag, and so bit into the head of what he assumed to be a toy – only to be taken aback when he realised he'd just decapitated an actual dead bat with his teeth. The incident led to mounting pressure from church and parents' groups, who attempted to get the concerts shut down, alleging a newfound charge of "animal cruelty" to go along with the usual one of "Satanism."

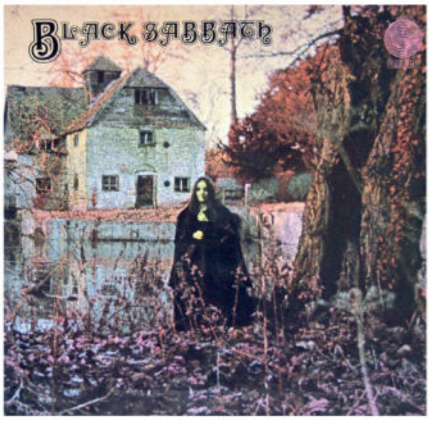
Ozzy explained that his Satanic buffoonery was just a bit of harmless role-playing, "like *An American Werewolf in London* or something, just a put-on… Why are these people picking on me? Why don't they picket Vincent Price? He must have been in 90 films with all kinds of Satanic influences."

According to Bob Martin, the co-editor of *Fangoria* magazine, the singer's appearance on the cover of his new album, *Bark at the Moon*, was intended to make just this

OZZY
FOREVER
BIRMINGHAM
WILL ALWAYS
LOVE YOU
OCEAN
taxi

DOM SLIKE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The original Black Sabbath: guitarist Tony Iommi, drummer Bill Ward, bassist Geezer Butler and vocalist Ozzy Osbourne. **BELOW**: The spooky cover of the band's eponymous first album. **BOTTOM**: The young Geezer Butler was heavily into esoteric subjects and had some odd personal experiences.



RJFORSTER / FLICKR

point. Osbourne was made up to look like a werewolf, which he felt no one could take seriously. He clearly underestimated the ability of fundamentalists to take the occult extremely seriously, werewolves included. The horror magazine noted that Ozzy was actually "a sincere Christian" who saluted audiences with a benevolent "God Bless".[3]

SABBRA CADABRA

Ozzy and his old bandmates from Black Sabbath quickly grew weary of their reputation as practitioners of dark magic, and publicly disavowed its practice, but that doesn't mean they weren't believers in the supernatural. Certainly Geezer Butler, the band's bassist and lyricist, had his share of brushes with the unexplained, or so he recounts in his recent autobiography *Into the Void: From Birth to Black Sabbath and Beyond*.

During Sabbath's early days, Butler was obsessed with occult reading matter, especially Dennis Wheatley and JRR Tolkien. Geezer would spend weekends at Middle Earth, an occult gathering place situated in the basement of a mansion in Holborn. The owners would give out free literature, including their own publications. All this reading had a profound effect on the Catholic-raised musician, who painted his one-bedroom flat "completely black" and decorated the walls with "inverted crosses" as well as "posters of Satan and all that kind of stuff."

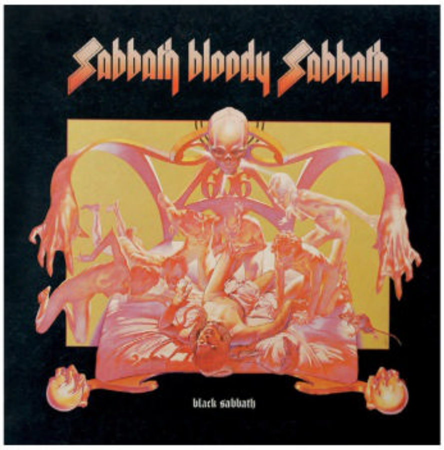
All this supernatural study eventually had a troubling effect on Geezer, who awoke one night in his apartment to see "a black shape standing at the foot of me bed". He later recalled, no doubt with a shiver, "It frightened the bloody life out of me!" So much so that he couldn't sleep for the rest of the night. "And this shape," Geezer elaborated, "for some reason I thought it was the Devil himself. And it just frightened the pissing life out of me." Butler was convinced the Devil was sending him a message: "It's either time to pledge allegiance or piss off!"

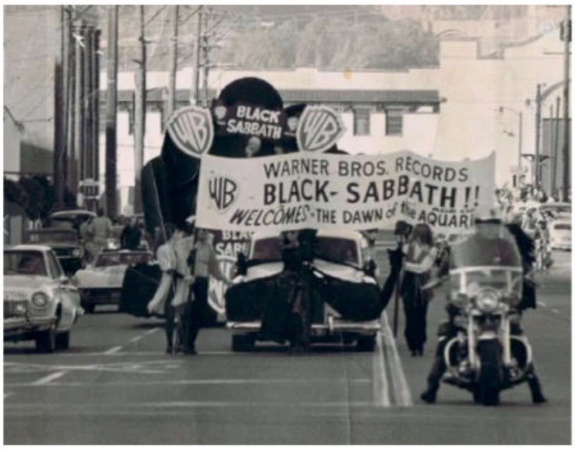
BUTLER WAS CONVINCED THE DEVIL WAS SENDING HIM A MESSAGE: PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE OR PISS OFF

Being a good Catholic schoolboy at heart, Geezer elected to piss off. Coming to his senses the next morning, he stripped the flat of its occult decorations and painted the walls a suitably non-Satanic orange: "I just went off the whole thing."[4]

Geezer was heavily into Gustav Holst's *The Planets* in those days, and especially liked to play the opening riff of "Mars, Bringer of War" on his bass. At the band's rehearsal room in Aston, Tony joined in and improvised on it with his guitar, diverting the riff into a tritone, which Black Sabbath chronicler Mick Wall claims was outlawed by the Church in mediæval times (see **FT212:43**).

The resulting song became the band's most collaborative effort to date, with Ozzy pitching in and helping Geezer concoct lyrics to go with the Holst-inspired melody. As Geezer noted, "A lot of kids were getting into mysticism and occultism." The band hoped their new song would convert Geezer's terrifying Satanic experience into a warning against dabbling in the occult.[5] Eventually titled "Black Sabbath," as were the band (formerly "Earth") and their first album, the Holst-inspired doom-laden ditty terrified drugged-out listeners in the





ABOVE LEFT: The band's classic 1973 album *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*. **ABOVE CENTRE**: Warner Brothers arranged a Black Sabbath parade in San Francisco complete with drag queens and Anton LaVey (above right). **BELOW**: Clearwell Castle in Gloucestershire: "We rehearsed in the dungeons and it was really creepy".

waning years of the counterculture and introduced the world to the banshee-like wailing of Ozzy Osbourne.

This interest in the occult is perhaps unsurprising, as Geezer's experiences with the supernatural went way back. As a child he'd refused to get on a bus that was leaving Birmingham's News Theatre and heading back to Aston. After learning that the bus had tipped over while crossing a bridge, the young Geezer was convinced he'd had a premonition of doom.[6]

Then, at the age of only 12 or 13, would-be Romeo Geezer dreamed about receiving a Dear John-type letter from a girl he'd spent his first date with: soon, the dream came true. This was benign, but other encounters with the unknown were spookier. At Geezer's childhood home in Aston there was a cold spot on the stairs, and a ghostly outline of a man in a flat cap in the door. There was the football that was "forcibly thrown" back at Geezer by some unseen presence, putting an end to his indoor football practice. But it was at their grandmother's house in Dublin that Geezer and his brother Peter actually saw their first ghost: a "diaphanous apparition… floating down the stairs." [7]

FAIRIES WEAR BOOTS

The band blamed much of their dark reputation on the Warner Brothers record label. Warner Brothers arranged for a Black Sabbath Parade to promote the band's American debut at the Fillmore West on San Francisco's Folsom Street. The company paid Anton LaVey, head of the Church of Satan, to orchestrate a bizarre tribute to the rising stars of supposedly Satanic rock. The parade went on, but without the band's presence. The musicians of the hour stayed home in Birmingham, missing out on the festivities.

The parade supposedly aligned with the "Dawn of Aquarius," and so a number of supposedly "astrological" floats paraded down the street, along with a flatbed truck carrying a band playing country versions of Sabbath songs. There was also a mariachi band and a number of "black men", who music journalist Mick Wall believes misunderstood the name Black Sabbath – but it's equally possible that Warner Brothers paid them to be there as a (bad) visual joke. Most of the participants were drag queens, presumably since most of the people hanging around Folsom Street that day happened to be members of Frisco's sizeable drag community. Considering that the growing metal community would largely consist of macho working class males, not necessarily sympathetic to the drag community, this seems bizarrely ironic. The band were shown pictures of the parade, and Geezer found the sights "stupid," "ridiculous," and "bizarre." Ozzy was "scared" to go out of his room for "six months." [8] Perhaps he was worried that the bizarre promotion would attract unstable fans, or perhaps he worried the astrological shenanigans, overseen by the High Priest of Satan no less, would indeed conjure some bad magickal vibes. [9]

It's a great story, but while Mick Wall claims Anton LaVey presided over this parade, the official Church of Satan website dismisses LaVey's participation as a "myth".[10] Geezer Butler believes Warner Brothers hired a LaVey lookalike for the event.[11]

PARANOID

While making *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, the band's fifth album, the gang rented Clearwell Castle, a mock-Gothic mansion in Gloucestershire's Forest of Dean. Butler said the spooky atmosphere was inspirational for them: "We rehearsed in the dungeons and it was really creepy, but it had some atmosphere, it conjured up things." Iommi recalled, "We rehearsed in the armoury there and one night I was walking down the corridor with Ozzy and we saw this figure in a black cloak… We followed this figure back into the armoury and there was absolutely no one there. Whoever it was had disappeared into thin air! The people that owned the castle knew all about this ghost."[12]

Clearwell's owners were renting their castle out to bands like Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Bad Company and Mott the Hoople, but they were hiding a sinister fact – their castle was haunted. The ghost was a female with a habit of entering rooms and making a mess. She also had a ghost child, to whom she would sing lullabies while playing a music box – presumably a ghostly music box.[13]

The band claimed they were often harassed by fans in black robes. When, at Clearwell, Iommi saw such a figure in black rushing towards him, he enlisted a roadie to help him chase after what they supposed to be "some lunatic that got into the castle" only to find that he had "totally disappeared." The

DAVID BAGNALL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Get thee behnd me, Satan: Tony Iommi, wearing his trusty cross, with Catherine Ogle, the Dean of Birmingham Cathedral. **BELOW LEFT**: Drummer Bill Ward claimed he was being attacked by... cottages. **BELOW**: Perhaps it was the strain of recording 1983's *Born Again* with Ian Gillan. Or perhaps it was the vodka.

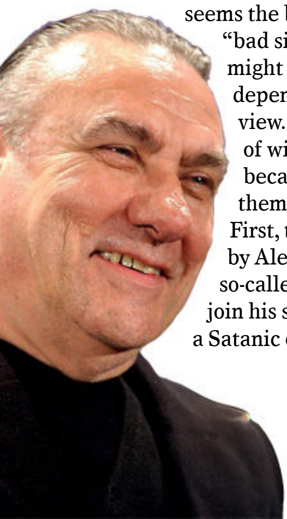
owner explained to him: "The castle's full of ghosts." [14]

A less supernatural (but more disturbing) incident occurred in August 1972. The band had just arrived in Knoxville, Tennessee, when they found a cross daubed in blood on the door of their dressing room. They were later to learn the vandal's identity when he attacked Iommi with a knife as the musician was kicking a malfunctioning amp.[15]

Previously, the king of heavy riffs claimed his life was saved by three angels when, as a teenager, the tyres blew out on a sports car he was testing out. In 2019 he recounted: "It's been said that they saved me for a purpose, because I went on to invent heavy metal." [16]

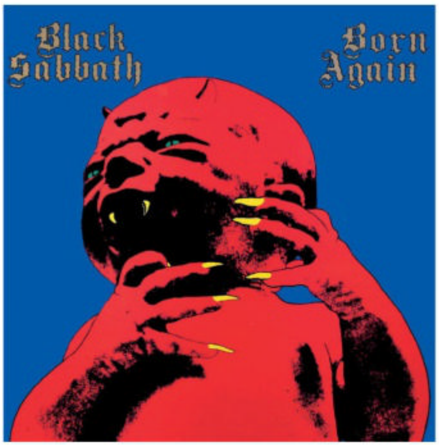
HEAVEN AND HELL

After all the bad vibes associated with heavy metal, this strikes a heartwarming note. It seems the band was getting on the "bad side" of the Satanic – which might be called the good side, depending on your point of view. At any rate, practitioners of witchcraft and black magic became quite upset with them back in the Seventies. First, they turned down efforts by Alex Sanders, England's so-called "King of Witches," to join his sect. Then, they rebuffed a Satanic offer to play a Walpurgis Night show at Stonehenge; which is kind of too bad, because it would have no doubt been a Walpurgis Night to remember.



ZUMA PRESS, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

OZZY REMOVED A TAP FROM THE KITCHEN SINK AND BEGAN WEARING IT AROUND HIS NECK



This sect (which Iommi indicates was affiliated with Sanders) resorted to a hex. According to the guitarist: "This sect put a curse on us. We took that very seriously." Amulet protection was needed. In the absence of an actual Christian cross, Ozzy removed a tap from the kitchen sink and began wearing it around his neck. The entire band had the same dream about wearing crosses round their necks, and so they began doing the same in real life. All of which makes the band sound like scaredy cats rather than Satanists.

Indeed, it was none other than John Thomas Osbourne, the father of the "Prince of Darkness," who started making aluminium crosses for the band and even selling them at concerts. The rest of the band may have outgrown their need for protection, but Iommi never has. "I never go on stage without wearing my cross," he commented in 2011, and indeed he still wears it.[17]

Not only that, Iommi claims to have briefly mastered the art of astral projection. This was also in the way-out early Seventies, of course. When he married Susan Snowdon (a "posh" high society gal) in late 1973, the newlyweds moved into a 200-room mansion midway between London and Birmingham. First, there was an apparition, which the musician somewhat vaguely describes as "more a figure" than a three-dimensional being. Then, the house turned out to be haunted by a poltergeist, which knocked a painting off the wall, opened a briefcase and rudely stole Tony's keys. Fortunately, his newfound in-laws assured him that the ghost was "friendly".

Danger
Live wires
below
OZZY OSBOURNE
LIVED AS A PRINCE;
REMEMBER

BRITISH NEWS AND MEDIA / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A shrine to Ozzy Osbourne on Navigation Way near New Street Station, Birmingham. Fans and visitors left floral tributes to metal's 'Prince of Darkness' after he passed away. Black Sabbath were handed the Keys to the City before his death in July.

Thinking about the ghost's ability to move objects got Iommi thinking about what else might be done with spiritual power. Perhaps influenced by his old chum Geezer, who'd been heavily into astrology charts and astral planes, Iommi became a devotee of the work of Lobsang Rampa (see **FT63:24-26**), and made his first attempts at astral travel. He managed to leave his body for a moment, but got frightened and jumped back in. After practising some more he was able to hover over his body and even float along to the beach. "It sounds mad," he admitted, but Iommi remains a firm believer in astral travelling. "I still believe you can go to a non-physical plane of existence. When you die you can go there, and you can look back on your life in a thing called akashic records."

Nearly a decade after Tony's experimentation, astral travel was to find its way into rock culture with Ozzy's brief reference – "Astral plane I travel too" – in his 1981 solo smash *Diary of a Madman*. It was no doubt a tribute to his wacky pals Geezer and Tony, who by then had kicked the singer out for excessive drinking and irresponsibility, a pretty big achievement for a band like Black Sabbath.[18]

Speaking of alcohol, what of Sabbath's least-known original member, the hard-partying, hard-drumming yet reclusive Bill Ward? Ward has the frightening distinction of being attacked… by cottages, of all things. Geezer reports that Ward showed up for the *Born Again* sessions in bad shape. This was the "Ian Gillan album" with the notorious "devil baby" cover, and it was recorded at Richard Branson's Oxfordshire castle in the spring of 1983.

The drummer was, in Geezer's words, "a gibbering wreck, pointing at the ceiling and saying, 'Those cottages up there keep attacking me! That cottage over there… it's going to land and finish me off!'" In this case it was determined the culprit was not ghosts but vodka, and Ward's concerned bandmates shipped him off to hospital until his delirium tremens could wear off.[19]

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2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBvbPGkbtOQ. Ozzy's awkward introduction goes from 11:55 to 13:15.

3 RH Martin, "Makeup's Greatest Hits", *Fangoria* 35, Vol. 3, 1984, p.12.

4 Mick Wall, *Black Sabbath: Symptom of the Universe*, St Martin's Press, 2013, p.42.

5 Ibid., p.43.

6 Geezer Butler, *Into the Void: From Birth to Black Sabbath and Beyond*, HarperCollins, 2023, p.67.

7 Ibid., p.68.

8 Wall, p.64.

9 Wall, p.65.

10 https://churchofsatan.com/myth-anton-lavey-held-parade-to-honor-black-sabbath/

11 Butler, p.85.

12 Steve Rosen, *Wheels of Confusion: The Story of Black Sabbath*, Castle Communications, 1996, p.77.

13 Wall, p.112.

14 Wall, p.113.

15 Butler, p.116. In another account (in *Reader's Digest*, of all places) Geezer, possibly misremembering, places the incident in Nashville. Probably joking, he says the disturbed fan tried to "sacrifice" Iommi. This is quoted at https://www.loudersound.com/news/geezer-butler-recalls-stage-jumper-attacking-tony-iommi and www.nme.com/news/music/black-sabbath-geezer-butler-lunatic-attempting-sacrifice-tony-iommi-3469747. Iommi's version (Iommi, p.83) places the attack and the cross at the Hollywood Bowl. He also doesn't claim the cross was made of blood, making it likely it was simply red paint.

16 Liz Scarlett, "Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi on the time three angels 'saved' his life after getting into a serious car crash", *Classic Rock*, 24 July 2024. www.loudersound.com/news/tony-iommi-car-crash-saved-by-angels

17 Tony Iommi with TJ. Lammers, *Iron Man: My Journey Through Heaven and Hell with Black Sabbath*, Perseus Books Group, 2011, pp.81-82.

18 Iommi, pp.120-122.

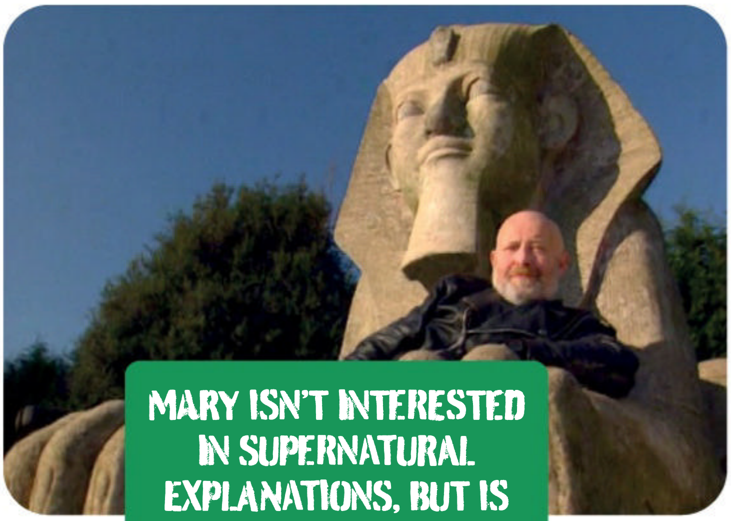
19 Butler, p.191.

BRETT TAYLOR is a regular contributor to FT and an Associate Producer on *Dead Souls*, the alleged "last movie" from filmmaker and former *Moviedrome* host Alex Cox, director of *Repo Man* and *Sid and Nancy*.

FORTEAN TV REVISITED

SERIES TWO

In 1997, Channel 4 viewers were treated to a television version of *Fortean Times* in which **REV LIONEL FANTHORPE** presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". After the show's success, Father Lionel was back with a second helping of *Fortean TV* in 1998. Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he concludes his series rewatch...



LEFT: Fanthorpe swaps his trusty motorcycle for a Sphinx. **BELOW:** Mary Tassel and her everlasting lightbulb.

It's time to wrap up our rewatch of the second series of Fortean TV. And to think the unthinkable: are the zany graphics, Fanthorpe's gnomic utterances and the surface level treatment of both the serious and the ridiculous in danger of wearing a tad thin? I mean, it's still absolutely wonderful television, but in contrast to the chaos of series one, a *formula* is becoming apparent.

In just a few weeks' time we were to see how far Fanthorpe would push the envelope, outraging both rational sense and our common decency with a much darker and more challenging spin-off, but that will have to wait until next time: first, let's look at episodes 5 to 8 of the main programme.

EPISODE 5

It's hard to think of a better example of Fortean TV's tabloid mix of the prosaic and the weird than a feature on a 61-year-old light bulb – a "modern day eternal flame" – in Rainham, Kent. Owner Mary Tassel says she's not surprised that original manufacturer Atlas went out of business. Ted Glenny, a "technical manager" at Philips Lighting confirms the bulb is remarkable. Mary isn't interested in supernatural explanations, but is concerned the light from the bulb will outlast her. Wikipedia keeps a running list of the world's longest lasting bulbs.[1] The current record holder is at least 123 years old, though Mary's bulb doesn't seem to rank anymore.

Then, we move on to the Virgin of the Subway at the Hidalgo Metro station in Mexico City, which Fanthorpe accurately describes as a 10-inch (25cm) long water stain. The Catholic Church also issued a statement that the phenomenon was not considered divine. However, the crowds of believers felt otherwise, forcing the removal of the paving stone to its own shrine above ground. A different churchman was quickly wheeled out to accept that it was "perfectly possible to venerate the image". I've written before about this kind of *pareidolia* (the Sacred Geometry of the Volkswagen Polo in **FT364:54-55**). It's the natural tendency to perceive a

> MARY ISN'T INTERESTED IN SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATIONS, BUT IS CONCERNED THE BULB WILL OUTLIVE HER

specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern. Since this episode was broadcast, the Virgin's original plastic enclosure has been destroyed by cigarette burns, requiring an upgrade to thicker glass, which now obscures her image. A similar sign appeared in a Chicago underpass in 2005. 2

Mandy and Steve Smith, landlords of the Lion & Royal in Navenby, Lincolnshire, have a problem with their Bacardi mysteriously turning into Pernod, picking up a distinctive aniseed flavour in the process. A psychic explains that a ghostly young lady in a purple dress is behind the nuisance. So following her advice, they place the bottle in a part of the bar that was previously separated, in the ghost's time, by a very thick wall – this solves the problem.

William III of England believed that spitting into a frog's mouth could cure him of toothache, Fanthorpe tells us. 3 It could be worse: in Bat Trang, Cambodia, the locals are eating the literal bullshit coming out the arse end of their magic cattle. Meanwhile, in Deir el Hatab, Jordan, an hermaphrodite billy goat can produce milk that cures impotence. Finally in West Africa, the Juju Man uses gruesome animal remains, including "prosperity soap" made from the crushed carcasses of rats, to protect businessmen and politicians from economic ruin. "It's certainly working for him," observes Fanthorpe drily as the witch doctor pulls out of his gated compound in a Mercedes. 4

This week's final feature is an extended piece set in the Gobi desert and introducing the Mongolian Death Worm (see **FT182:50-54**). Czech explorer Ivan Mackerle has spent years studying the legends of the 12-foot (3.7m) long red worm that can kill its prey with lightning bolts or poison. The legends have been passed down for centuries, but only came to the attention of Western scientists in 1926 thanks to adventurer Roy Chapman Andrews. 5 Fanthorpe correlates most sightings with a "poisonous" red plant called Goyo that grows in the region,6 suggesting the worm feeds on this to become poisonous itself.

I wonder if the diminutive worm-like plant and its properties are themselves a source of the legend? Zoologist John Cloudsley-Thompson (who we first met in Arthur C Clarke's *Mysterious World* talking about giant squid **FT410:33**) believes the Gobi could yet hide a real animal. On the other hand, the Mongolian shamans believe the worm is really a desert demon that attacks people in their dreams.

Mackerle describes his own sinister nightmare in which the Death Worm sucks on his back like a giant leech, waking to find very real scars on his body. The expedition doctor discovered Mackerle had developed a high temperature and was coming out in bruises anywhere his body was under pressure – hence, presumably, his back while asleep.

FT and Weird Weekend regular Richard Freeman, along with FT's crypto-columnist Karl Shuker are quoted in a summary on the Death Worm written by Mark Hay in 2024. Mackerle ultimately grew disillusioned before his death in 2013, but Shuker remained unconvinced by various claims the Death Worm was a harmless local snake.7

TOP: The virgin of Hildago Metro Station, Mexico. **CENTRE:** Mandy and Steve Smith of the haunted Lion & Royal in Lincolnshire. **ABOVE:** An eyewitness describes his encounter with the Mongolian Death Worm.

TOP: The strange bruises that afflicted Czech explorer Ivan Mackerle when he dreamt of the Mongolian Death Worm. **CENTRE:** Spiritual healer ‘Elaine’ exorcises a tormented horse in Lincoln. **ABOVE:** Some of the mysterious mummies of San Bernado.

ELAINE DETECTED THE GHOST OF A DEAD AIRMAN STILL DRESSED IN HIS PARACHUTE STANDING AROUND IN THE TOP FIELD

EPISODE 6

As regular readers will know, some animals seem to be able detect bad weather or even earthquakes. A summary from the US Geological Survey is very even-handed: it acknowledges the possibility, but warns it is not a reliable or consistent means of prediction. [8] Now, what else can our furry friends see?

Sharon Norcross of Lincoln noticed a marked deterioration in her horse’s behaviour following a change of stables. The vet could find no reason for the biting and kicking and they discussed whether he sadly needed to be put down. As a last resort Norcross reached out to spiritual healer Elaine, “a neurotic housewife who’s going to talk drivel to me – I’m wasting money on this” she suspected. Yet Elaine detected the ghost of a dead airman still dressed in his parachute standing around in the top field. After the distracting spook was sent on to the light, the horse’s conduct improved dramatically.

Sharon learns that on 13 February 1942 a Bristol Blenheim bomber had apparently crashed nearby, thus explaining the lingering ghostly airman. But I can’t find this incident on a seemingly authoritative archive of crash logs in Lincolnshire (everybody needs a hobby). There are some potential candidates it might have been garbled from – for example, a Blenheim that crashed on the 13 February *1943* near Ropsley, but nobody was translated to the spirit world in that particular accident. [9]

In San Bernardo, Colombia, the town’s dead have failed to decompose (see **FT91:19, 137:30-31**). Touched up by a local taxidermist (but to what extent?), there were now three dozen mummies on display in a macabre tourist attraction making “a very interesting family day out” according to one visitor who brought her own children. Scientific tests have proven “fruitless” – the villagers believe the incorruption is due to something in their local diet or the purity of their drinking water. For an update and continued speculation on the cause check out a recent article in the *New York Post*. [10]

In contrast, in the central highlands of Madagascar, entirely rotten corpses are unearthed every seven years to become guests of honour at ceremonies to bestow a sacred blessing on their living relatives (see **FT55:47-49, 56:38-40**). They are more likely to infect them with plague, according to *Live Science*. [11]

Lenin's communist corpse in Moscow has been perfectly preserved since 1924, but since the end of the Soviet Union there's been no more state funding for his embalmers, so they're making their unique skills available to the general public; that's capitalism for you. A unique formaldehyde solution is injected into the veins of the cadaver, which is then immersed in a preserving bath for six weeks. To preserve a body for a year costs £300,000 (which makes Corky Ra's modern mummification process last season seem like a bargain; see **FT449:45-46**), limiting the clientele to Russian mobsters killed in gang warfare. The patriotic doctors are still keeping Lenin's body pristine for free, although it's a controversial and largely cosmetic process which, à la Theseus's ship, leaves less and less of the original Lenin intact.[12]

Pareidolia again. West Hendon, in North London, and Farida Gadatara finds a tomato with a vague mark in it that might spell Allah. The local imam endorsed the holy tomato and the community came to pay homage. We went through all this with aubergines last time (**FT448:29**). When the tomato started to perish, Farida made it into a curry.

In "the Legendary Saltersgate Inn" in North Yorkshire a fire has allegedly been burning without interruption for over 200 years, keeping the spirit of a murdered customs officer imprisoned under the hearth stone. Low level poltergeist activity is ascribed to the restless phantom: pictures jumping off walls, beer taps turning off. Despite all this publicity the pub has since failed, and the building was finally demolished in 2018, with no news as to whether the embittered customs officer is now free to exact his revenge. [13]

We looked at Canada's Ogopogo lake monster in Clarke's *Mysterious World* (**FT410:28**) and Fanthorpe's treatment covers similar, er, water, again featuring the unconvincing Art Folden video. Mike Dash returns to suggest it's a Cadborosaurus, corpses of which had possibly been recovered off the coast of Western Canada. Unfortunately, far from an official designation, Cadborosaurus is a zoological controversy in itself. [14]

Okanagan native Perry Joe Williams fills us in on the local folklore: his ancestors provided payment to the lake devil *Nahaeek* to safely cross his domain. I note here a similar disparity between the scientists looking for a real animal and the indigenous people preferring a spiritual explanation, as we saw with the Deathworm.

We also learn the name Ogopogo is a modern invention based on an unrelated (and unlistenable) novelty record from

TOP: the preserved corpse of Vladimir Lenin, bathed in suitably Soviet red light. **CENTRE:** A holy North London tomato spells the name of Allah. **ABOVE:** Okanagan native Perry Joe Williams shares his ancestral stories of Canada's Ogopogo lake monster.

1924.[15] If you want to get it absolutely right, even *Nahaeek* is a simplified rendering of the original Okanagan word. Tourism Kelowna goes for *nx a x itk* ,[16] which I include here solely to torment the type-setting goblins deep within Fortean Towers. However, as I wrote last time, Ogopogo has become economically vital to the community, and it turns out that where there's money in a name there's much legal angst over who controls it.[17]

We're sung out with The Ogopogo song, featuring Fanthorpe as a Mountie and Alf in the kind of sensitive tribal fancy dress that we can kindly describe as "meeting the broadcast standards of its time".

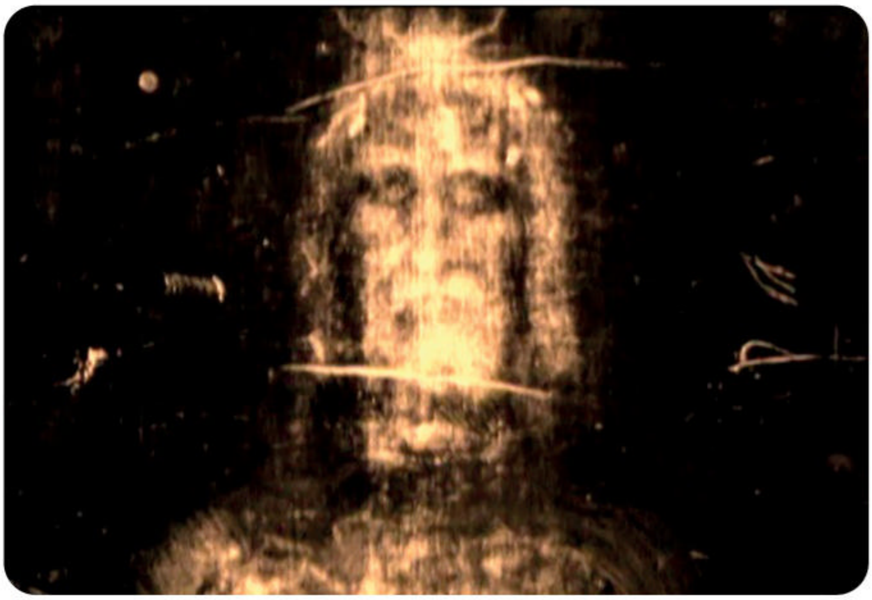
EPISODE 7

We now return to the uninspiring topic of SLIders (Street Light Interference; see **FT448:30** and Hilary Evans's article in **FT273:52-55**). Debbie Wolf from Brighton writes in after seeing the piece in the previous series and failing to understand the power of coincidence. For her, romantic encounters cause literal sparks to fly: she sets her car indicators flashing and attracts the attention of a passing policeman when she tries to make out in the back seat. The re-enactment features Debbie winding down the manual rear windows to greet the constable (at least I think that's what her arm is pumping). Bulbs pop. The fridge dies. The TV skips channels. Debbie was still making slow news days in 2012, and you can read about a failed experiment involving her in the *London Evening Standard*.[18]

The Shroud of Turin is introduced, along with the established theories that it's a mediæval fake or a primitive photograph. See **FT450:4-5** for the latest (contradictory) results. Needless to say, the mystery rumbles on, but more importantly, has Jesus also appeared on a polishing cloth at Leeds City Council? Patricia Cole's parish priest provided tactful reassurance that the oily smear she discovered wasn't a bad omen.

Fanthorpe wonders if dolphins and whales could be our nearest evolutionary cousins and if our next subject is some kind of missing link (biology spoiler: it's been 95 million years since we had a common ancestor).[19] Cuban-born Francisco "Pipin" Ferreras is the Dolphin Man, a record-breaking free diver who shares a number of physiological tricks with marine mammals, collapsing and filling his lungs with fluid in order to dive over 400 feet (122m) underwater. Ferrera also reduces his heart rate to a mere eight beats per minute through using breathing and meditation techniques derived from Yoga and Tai Chi.

The British Sub-Aqua Club warn of the medical risk of hypoxia.[20] Ferreras tells us he is more worried about tax and bills, but he still managed to get embroiled in a complex legal dispute with Netflix over a fictionalised depiction of a suspiciously



They taste like chicken

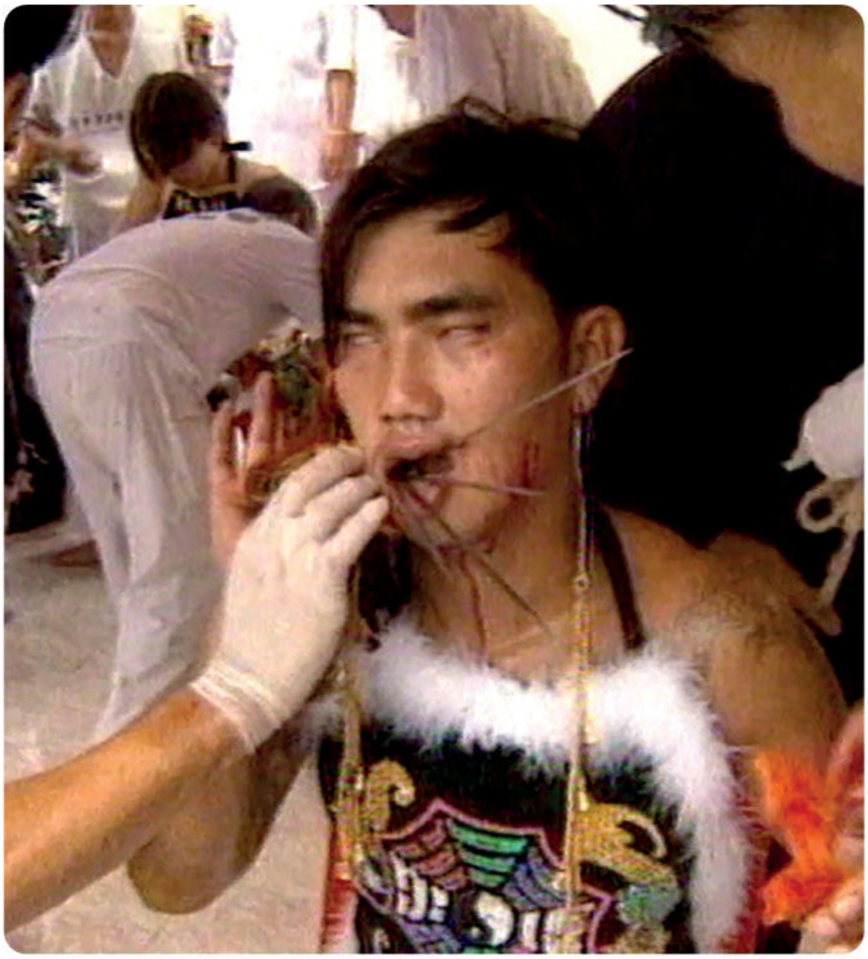
TOP: The Shroud of Turin. **CENTRE:** Did a similar image of Christ appear to Leeds council cleaner Patricia Cole on her polishing cloth **ABOVE:** A newly described species of long-necked turtle tastes like chicken according to local hunters.

AT THE VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL IN PHUKET DEVOTEES IMPALE THEIR CHEEKS WITH A BIZARRE RANGE OF OBJECTS

similar character that suggested he might be responsible for the death of his wife. [21]

In Katherine Gorge, Australia, a new species of long-necked vegetarian turtle has been discovered. The local aborigines report it tastes like chicken. Meanwhile, the Vu Quang Ox has been confirmed in Vietnam [22] – a shame it's one of the world's rarest animals or we might have learnt what it tastes like too. In Leeds, amateur zoologist Martin Pickersgill has the largest private collection of preserved frogs in Europe. Aged just 21 he discovered a new species of African puddle frog. His long-suffering girlfriend Christine Watson was responsible for pickling around 1,800 specimens, one of which he has promised to name after her. Martin was still going strong in 2017, describing yet another new species of amphibian, but sadly Pickersgill's Reed Frog has been recognised as critically endangered. [23]

We conclude with the perils of the inadequately named Vegetarian Festival in Phuket, Thailand, where devotees impale their cheeks with a bizarre range of objects to commemorate a Chinese



TOP: Martin Pickersgill and his world-beating collection of pickled frogs. **ABOVE:** Extraordinary scenes at the Thai Vegetarian Festival.

TOP: Participants"pierce their cheeks with a rod and put 10 or more pineapples on the end". **CENTRE:** In Russia leeches are used to treat impotence, migraines and their excretions are the key ingredient in anti-wrinkle cream. **ABOVE:** Father Lionel introduces Father Goose and his trainee flock.

opera troupe that once saved the island from plague. Participants are expected to abstain from meat, alcohol and sex and believe they are possessed and experience no pain – at least until they come down afterwards. We covered similar feats with Clarke's show, where Sri Lankan Professor Carlo Fonseka thoroughly debunked their mystical elements (**FT434:42**). But local religious leaders defend the practice, pointing out that participants "pierce their cheek with a rod and put 10 or more pineapples on the end – do you think ordinary people can do that?"

EPISODE 8

From the opening shots we learn that Fanthorpe may be comfortable on his motorbike, but he is somewhat less at home balancing on a skateboard.

Marjorie Folk and her husband Derek stay at a phantom bed and breakfast in Hastings. There's a rattling bathroom door, an invitation to a ball that's a century out of date and the dotty old proprietor plans to go and see an opera singer who's been dead for 30 years. Their imagination has run away with them I suspect, especially since the legend of the time-slip hotel has become something of a recurring trope: remember, there was a very similar story set in France in Clarke's *Strange Powers* (**FT434:48**).

Another unremarkable section follows on the resurgent use of medical leaches. We learn that 50,000 of the creatures are bred a year at a special Welsh leech farm for use in plastic surgery. They're fed on blood-filled sausages, but carefully starved before deployment to the hospital to ensure a healthy appetite when they arrive. In Russia, leeches are being adopted as a treatment for everything from impotence to migraines, with their excretions the key ingredient in a new anti-wrinkle face cream. The producers boast that Russia is no longer "lagging behind the West", at least in the niche field of leech exploitation. A Russian website continues to sell the leeches (minimum order 1,000) and leech extract for use in cosmetic products. [24]

From leeches to William Lishman, of Ontario, Canada, otherwise known as "Father Goose" because of his heartwarming work teaching infant geese how to migrate by imprinting them upon his light aircraft. His other achievements included a replica of Stonehenge made out of scrapped cars. [25]

In 1871 German businessman Heinrich Schliemann uncovered the remains of the ancient City of Troy (Fanthorpe doesn't mention that in doing so he also began a chain of events that led to the adoption of the swastika as the official logo of the Nazi party). [26] Today, Schliemann's successors are still searching for lost worlds and ancient civilisations. Ron Wyatt is on a quest to identify biblical sites using only the Old Testament as his guide. He claims

ABOVE LEFT: Alternative archæologist Ron Wyatt. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Lionel Fanthorpe and Alf wave goodbye at the official end of Series 2.

to have discovered Noah's Ark in eastern Turkey (he didn't) [27] and traced the parting of the Red Sea and the biblical Mount Sinai to Saudi Arabia. His controversial findings are seized upon by revisionist David Musa Pidcock and his now defunct Islamic Party of Britain to prove that Arabia represents the original Holy Land and Mohamed was God's final prophet.

Then a quick plunge into Atlantis, from Plato's tales to British researcher Jim Allen and his belief that Atlantis was close to the shore of Lake Poopoo in Bolivia. [28] (Fanthorpe relishes pronouncing this.) His forthcoming expedition will be led by explorer Colonel John Blashford-Snell (now life president of the Centre for Fortean Zoology). [29]

AN ENDING?

Fanthorpe wraps up the series without providing an overarching analysis in the manner of Clarke, or indeed any indication that this might be the last episode of the show. Instead, he uses his final minutes to introduce the late-night *Fortean TV Uncut* that would begin a short but startling run the following week. After a slightly underwhelming sophomore series it would be these four episodes that took FTV into much darker, sometimes shocking territory, and we'll be digging through them with relish next month.

NOTES

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longest-lasting_light_bulbs

2 www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-12762009000200005

3 He became more famous in my own country for something else: https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Boyne

4 A gentler equivalent exists, with the vermin swapped out for mango and shea butter: www.natures-touch.co.uk/collections/prosperity-range

5 This website in his honour repeatedly asserts Chapman-Andrews as a likely inspiration for Indiana Jones: https://roychapmanandrewssociety.org/roy-chapman-andrews/

6 www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468265920300950

7 https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/mongolian-death-worm. You can also read Karl Shuker's tribute to Ivan Mackerle on his blog: https://karlshuker.blogspot.com/2013/01/goodbye-ivan-my-tribute-to-ivan.html

8 www.usgs.gov/faqs/can-animals-predict-earthquakes#

9 www.bcar.org.uk/new1943-incident-logs#feb

10 https://nypost.com/2024/05/09/lifestyle/dead-bodies-keep-mummifying-in-this-mountain-town-and-scientists-are-baffled/

11 www.livescience.com/60783-dancing-with-dead-madagascar-plague.html

12 www.scientificamerican.com/article/lenin-s-body-improves-with-age1/

13 www.thewhitbyguide.co.uk/the-saltersgate-inn/

14 https://tetzoo.com/blog/2020/11/16/cadborosaurus-carcass-review

15 I listened so you really don't have to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQE8T6Ip6Ic

16 www.tourismkelowna.com/blog/post/the-legend-the-spirit-the-creature-the-history-of-ogopogo/

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19 https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2015/05/07/humans-and-dolphins-same-big-brains-separate-evolutionary-paths/#

20 www.webmd.com/asthma/hypoxia-hypoxemia

21 https://divernet.com/scuba-news/freediving/pipin-v-netflix-freedivers-lawsuit-thrown-out/

22 https://vietnam.panda.org/en/our_work/wildlife/species_conservation/saola/

23 www.researchgate.net/profile/Martin-Pickersgill; www.amphibians.org/amazing-amphibians/pickersgills-reed-frog/

24 https://www.leech.ru/en/catalog.htm

25 www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-wednesday-edition-1.4471382/remembering-artist-bill-lishman-the-man-who-flew-with-canadian-geese-1.4471389

26 www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-the-swastika-an-ancient-symbol-of-good-fortune-used-around-the-world-became-the-nazi-logo-180962812/. I wonder which Indiana Jones characters Schliemann inspired?

27 This recent article carefully debunks the Ark claims, while going to surprising length to explain how the misidentification was not entirely unreasonable in the first place: www.csun.edu/~vcgeo005/bogus.html

28 www.atlantisbolivia.org/

29 "JBS" succeeded Bernard Heuvelmans as Life President of the CFZ. He also claims to have invented whitewater rafting: www.johnblashfordsnell.org.uk/biography/

Ryan's coverage of the first series of *Fortean TV* can be found in **FT448:28-35** and **449:44-51**. For his surveys of *Arthur C Clarke's Mysterious World* and *Strange Powers*, see **FT410:32-39, 411:42-47, 412:44-49** and **FT432:32-39, 433:42-49, 434:42-49.**

Fortean TV: The Complete Series was released on DVD by Network in 2022 and reviewed in **FT426:56-57**. It has since gone out of print and is eye-wateringly expensive if you can manage to find a copy on eBay.

RYAN SHIRLOW is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His latest effort is a spooky children's audio drama, *The Automatic Leprechaun*, available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com.

From the Embassy Club to Eternity

Have you heard the one about Bernard Manning MC-ing his own funeral? **KATE CHERRELL** tells the story of *Bernard Manning From Beyond the Grave*...

*"I hope you don't f***ing drop me. The way they're carrying me, you'd think I'd died of f***ing lead poisoning."*

LEFT: Bernard Manning confronts his own dead body. **BELOW**: Alive, well and on stage. **FACING PAGE**: Manning's (real) coffin passes his beloved Embassy Club in 2006.

> *"Has Manning earned a place in Heaven, or will he burn in Hell?"*

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Funerals are never an easy experience, and can be made considerably harder when the deceased is narrating the entire affair. Such was the case for the friends and family of Bernard Manning when he died in 2007.

Manchester comedian Bernard Manning was as synonymous with working men's clubs and mother-in-law jokes as he was with the casual racism that landed him in hot water during the latter decades of his career. Famous for his appearances on the popular 1970s shows *The Comedians* and *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club*, his wartime dabbling in entertainment had led to a career in compering, comedy and crooning that was both controversial and contradictory. While his material focused on sex and race, he was a spiritually conflicted man, raised a Catholic and clearly devout in his own, questionable way. As Manning's health waned in his 70s, his relationship with death, the afterlife and his memorialisation moved to the forefront of his mind, until he was actively planning his own funeral.

Never one to shy away from the limelight, Manning chose to film the process of planning for his death and funeral, shadowed by his manager and with occasional 'talking head' interviews with his biographer, journalist Jonathan Margolis. It is Margolis who presents the first dichotomy of the documentary; as Manning appears both living and dead to viewers, observing his own hearse, his biographer answers the question of whether Bernard Manning will be missed, with "Not really, because most people thought he was dead anyway." Manning ultimately inhabits several versions of death and his spirit self on screen; his dead body, his now-dead commentary self, and the death that some outsiders perceived him to have experienced many years prior. Despite becoming a synonym for bigotry and 'bad' comedy in recent years, the reality of Manning's life, and death, is not as straightforward as contemporary condemnation would have us believe. Manning repeatedly cuts an unexpectedly sympathetic character as he is superimposed alongside his grieving family, reacting to gags he never heard in life

The film was intended to be suitable for broadcast on television, offering both entertainment and a reassessment of Manning's legacy, and was completed during Manning's funeral in June 2007 and broadcast in full on Channel 4 later that same year. Far from being a gentle retrospective of the comedian's life, the finished film, entitled *Bernard Manning From Beyond the Grave*, proved to be one of the most unsettling viewing experiences in modern memory.

Part religious confession and part uneasy stand-up, Manning's film shows a man crushed under the weight of religious guilt and judgement, but stubborn to the last. Utilising green screen technology, *From Beyond the Grave* depicted Manning presenting his own death, funeral, obituary – and even his own corpse. The film opens with a shot of the deceased comedian, laid out in his coffin, as his living double emerges onto the screen, addressing the viewer: "Well, well, well, that's the quietest I've been for many, many a long year." Interspersed with footage of a slow-moving hearse (with the number plate '1 LAF') and clips from *The Comedians*, Manning remarks, "Oh, how sad," and bows his head in a mark of respect as he watches his own coffin hoisted onto the shoulders of pallbearers.

Punctuated with friendly jibes both to and from friends and family in the funeral procession – including Chubby Brown's beautiful remark of "Bernard Manning… what a bastard" – Manning's funeral functions as a springboard through which he can process his own mortality and judgement. His unhappy relationship with his own racial biases is a common theme throughout the strange film; while he attributes it to his working-class upbringing, his constant references to race, and his potential imminent damnation suggest that the much-reviled comic went to his grave with a certain degree of unfinished business. Or, as fellow comic Frank Carson guffawed in the crematorium: "How could he be racist? He had four black horses!?"

Continually replaying both his glory days and his greatest controversies in a deeply uncomfortable spiritual cycle, Manning stages his own arrival at the pearly gates, portraying his deceased self sitting at purgatory's dressing room mirror, dressed in a white T-shirt and boxer shorts, while an actor takes the role of St Peter. These small scripted scenes offer a glimpse into the reality of a stubborn and steadfast man, blindsided by the one uncertainty remaining: is there an afterlife? The later title cards pose questions that appear to be directed at Manning's spiritual crisis, but are ultimately moral quandaries for the audience: "Much loved comedian or racist bigot?" and "Has he earned a place in Heaven, or will he burn in Hell?" While Manning is unsure about eternity, he is certain of one thing throughout: "I've done nowt wrong." As a spectral mediator,

Manning addresses his most famous 90s controversies, including his use of racial slurs, with those around him doubling down or contextualising Manning's language by framing him as a great 'anarchist', rather than a bigot. Despite his attempts to appeal to younger generations of both the working men's club scene and those of more liberal leanings, in both life and death, Manning appears to bear grudges. As a vengeful Virgil, leading the viewer through a Manchester-based Inferno, he reframes his infamous experience on the Mrs Merton show (whereby he labelled himself a racist) as a sign of her failings and his ultimate triumph. This misjudged anarchistic streak, never more visible than here, when his own egomania and assurance of being the greatest comedian in Britain, joined with his desire to 'one up' or 'throw off' a fellow comic, ultimately lead to his downfall. Speaking nine years before Mrs Merton comedian Caroline Aherne's own untimely death, Manning spits out his judgement of "Who's heard of Mrs Merton now? I've got tons of videos out. Mrs Merton will be lucky if the undertaker turns up."

Manning's dabblings in forgiveness and contrition soon stall permanently, as fun tableaux give way to genuine – if contrived – conversations with far younger fellow comics, following a densely-packed hotel bar show in Blackpool. Here, Manning speaks with an unwavering arrogance as he deliberately insults and dismisses the one black man in the room, and doubles down on his stance with a tirade of racist impressions, reiterating his status as top dog at any cost. Within these small snippets of Manning's final performances, the viewer is presented with a further dichotomy: while the deceased Manning seeks redemption, and plays to the line of 'not seeing colour', he argues that 'Heaven is a multi-cultural society… Put me in a theatre and I'll have 'em laughing." His anger in reality – whether through professional or personal frustration – does not present a comedian trying desperately to cling onto the dregs of club culture, but the final days of a complicated and terrified man whose arrogance overshadowed the remainder of his career.

WORLD FAMOUS EMBASSY CLUB

BANG MEDIA INTERNATIONAL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Meanwhile, Jonathan Margolis, a sporadic journalistic presence throughout the ordeal, attempts to contextualise Manning's less pleasant behaviour by evoking the "shadow of imperialism" under which Manning was born. Margolis had written an exhaustive biography of Uri Geller several years prior, and one of Manning shortly before, so was well experienced in presenting the convoluted lives of unusual and divisive characters. However, his role in *Beyond the Grave* is unclear, save for adding a little symbolic professionalism to Manning's deathly pantomime of an existential crisis.

Beyond the Grave makes for strangely-paced viewing; intending to portray an organic process from illness to death, it presents a man constantly at odds with himself, aware of both a living audience and a theoretical legacy, pre-empting insults and tabloid headlines at every turn. His obsession with red-top fame ultimately manifests in scripted cutaways of Manning arguing for redemption against himself and an imagined enemy. Addressing angels, God, and St Peter, he flip-flops between aggressor and would-be redeemed soul, condemner and even a deity, dressing the part in an amateur dramatics-style confessional. Addressing God with all the familiarity of a life-long Catholic, these moments of religious piety are counterbalanced by clips of Manning's own status as a God of the club circuit. Like Jesus entering Jerusalem, Manning is welcomed by punters, not with palm leaves, but with half-filled pint glasses, as the crowd chants and cheers, clamouring for a handshake with outstretched arms. As Manning reaches his throne of a folding chair beside the Manchester United Supporter's Club stage, he breathlessly delivers a handful of jokes to an adoring crowd, before recounting a huge list of ailments with a stubby cigarette in hand.

Manning's pseudo-supernatural attempt to process his place in eternity is all the more curious as he wrestles with his own authenticity as a performer so synonymous with working men's clubs, rather than grand stages. Despite becoming a household name, Manning's spectral self constantly reminds both the audience, and himself, that he once played the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, but conversely refused to leave his Embassy Club, even when offered a supposedly lucrative American tour. Manning's devotion to his club and community is so great that it transcends religious devotion; while other comics left smaller club stages in the dust as soon as the Palladium doors opened, Manning never missed a show at the Embassy, even on the night his mother died. Manning's Embassy was not a club, but a church; a church whose grand portrait mosaic was remade following his death, with the comedian's ashes mixed into the grout.

Despite all of Manning's posturing and snide remarks, this scrapbook of a documentary offers a rare glimpse of the man behind the bluster. When visiting the crematorium a year before his death, an impromptu message to camera, intended for use during the funeral film, reduces him to tears. Thanking his partner and son for attending, Manning speaks gently: "I'm going to a better place, so don't worry about me and have a good life, that's the main thing. I love you all. Tara." Angel cosplays and ghostly green-screens aside, by confronting his real legacy, Manning offers a rare moment of raw humanity, devoid of all performance. Similarly, domestic Manning is jarringly ordinary, as he sinks into an arm chair, dressed in nothing but a pair of white underpants; a deflated tyre of a man whose vast number of prescription tablets are kept in an old Roses tin. This Manning cuts a tragic and somewhat vulnerable figure, but one clearly adored by his partner Lynn, who finds immense discomfort in his pre-emptive video eulogy, meeting the project with nothing but grief. After 18 years together, Lynn's responses are incredibly jarring in their cold and earnest honesty. Asked if she'll miss him when he's gone, she answers with a single, simple remark, "It'll kill me."

Manning's weird documentary isn't so much an exploration of his mental journey to death, or his personal conflict with a Catholic idea of eternity, but a cathartic project in which Manning forcibly convinces himself of a great, outstretched eternity. While he may not reach his answers theologically, he jumps the queue of the great beyond by test-driving the afterlife, grieving for himself before anyone else gets the chance. To Manning, faith had become a catch-up exercise, only faltering in moments of realisation that he doesn't actually have all the answers he needs. Nonetheless, he remains defiant to the last, convinced of his faultlessness, announcing to God that "It's been 40 years since my last confession and I've got absolutely nothing to tell you."

Bernard Manning from Beyond the Grave is a curious and unsettling curio that finishes where it began, with a death, and with judgement. Manning leaves an uneasy legacy and has the final word through pure supernatural defiance, spending eternity as God of the Embassy Club, if nowhere else.

KATE CHERRELL is a writer and academic specialising in 19th century Spiritualism. She curates the blog BurialsandBeyond.com.

Midsomer's Theatre of Blood

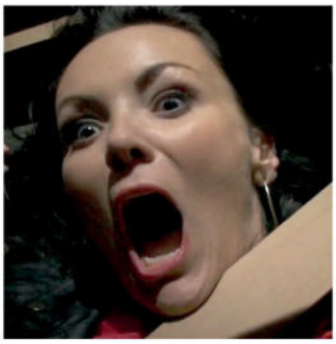
TIM WEINBERG ponders the popularity and longevity of *Midsomer Murders*, and the English County that refuses to give up its Old Ways. Is this *The Wicker Man* of Sunday night TV?

"Every time I go into some Midsomer Village it's always the same thing. Blackmail, sexual-deviancy, suicide and murder. How could you possibly expect me to go live in one of them" – DCI Tom Barnaby

We all love *Midsomer Murders*, right? The murdered wealthy, missing wills, glamorous mistresses, severed hands – and that's just one episode.[1] Similarly, the murders: head bashed in with a flashlight, force-fed a meat-pudding, run-over by a steam roller on a cricket field; and, yes, that's all one episode too.[2]

MARK BOURDILLON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Inspector John Barnaby (Neil Dudgeon) makes yet another gruesome discovery in *Midsomer Murders*. **BELOW**: Martine McCutcheon faces death by cheese in "Schooled in Murder".



No spoiler alert: vicars are all insane and are usually killers

With its gothic, red-stained lettering and sinister waltz theme (played on a theremin, no less), *Midsomer Murders* wasn't designed to look like the average TV detective show, but something more reminiscent of *Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected* or *Hammer House of Horror*. Debuting on 23 March 1997, it took over the prestigious 8-10pm Sunday night drama slot recently vacated by *Poirot*. Pulling in 13.5 million viewers was its first achievement, but no one could have anticipated its longevity and popularity. At the time of writing, 24 seasons and 140 episodes have been broadcast, and viewing figures have never dropped below six million. Those responsible for the show, Anthony Horowitz and Douglas Watkinson, had clearly done their homework. It starred John Nettles, fresh from a decade as *Bergerac* – thinking-woman's crumpet and a proven ambassador for tourism – so *Midsomer* was always going to be a bigger proposition than the handful of Inspector Barnaby novels that spawned it.[3]

Visually (pretty girls in summer dresses ride bicycles and wave at passing trains… before discovering their friend has been butchered), it evokes the by-gone nostalgia of *The Darling Buds of May*. To further emphasise its timeless quality, modern technology is kept to a minimum: mobiles are for talking-on, forensics can be faulty, CCTV keeps breaking down and drones drop swords out of the sky, through people's heads.

The programme also satisfies our taste for the gothic and grotesque, but also – as we will see – absolves the viewer of guilt. It pays homage to British horror from *The Wicker Man* and *An American Werewolf in London* (even in Midsomer, all farm-workers and pub regulars have a bizarre West Country accent and boggle-eyed stare), to *Theatre of Blood*, that camp masterpiece of decapitation, electrocution and forced poodle-eating.

Essentially, though, the series is a rural murder mystery. But even Agatha Christie realised early on the self-imposed limitations of the genre: only a handful of characters, a few locations and the same old deaths – shooting, stabbing, bashing, strangling – and quickly abandoned her Miss Marple stories. Midsomer's solution was to make means and motive central, at the expense of character development; after all, who needs characters when you can have victims drowning in a bowl of eels and eggs, suffocating in beeswax or being crushed by a giant cheese?

While there are a lot of murders, they are usually committed as a spree after an initial trigger-event. The implication is always that there is a finite list of victims, and Inspector Barnaby's job therefore is to solve the mystery and try to prevent the last crime in the sequence, lest the whole incident remain unsolved. The murderers usually confess without much provocation or resistance, or, in all honesty, proof; our heroes go back to civilisation, represented by the county town of Causton, and the show ends with Barnaby at home, having a drink with his family. There are no loose ends, no killers out there (for now) and we can all

sleep soundly again.

Midsomer villains are brilliant, cold, calculating, strong or wealthy. The crimes often involve sophisticated technology or heavy machinery, often quite at odds, you'd think, with their perpetrators' capabilities. These felons all seem to move freely and silently on any number of Midsomer's always-full-Moon nights. Motives are primal: money, power, revenge and sex.

The series has always favoured sexual equality, both in murderers and victims. Women are prone to be vampish and sexually available, or are elderly spinsters. The former are punished for their sexuality, the second for being busy-bodies, blackmailers or just sad, lonely people with no social skills. Gay characters are generally murderers or victims. The men are all in denial to themselves and their families. Lesbians are attractive, though, and the show proved its commitment to sexual equality by offering a particularly beautiful example, naked and dismembered in a suitcase. Recently, and even more inclusively, an episode featured a sympathetic gay drag queen.

Then, in their own category, there are priests and vicars. No spoiler alert: they are all insane and usually killers, from Richard Briers's unblinking psychopath ("Death's Shadow") to Mark Gatiss's hysterical homosexual ("The Sword of Guillaume"). They have no natural allies even among their own congregations, except for the occasional, fanatical devotee. Their communities are prone to schism, intolerance and an intense fear of cults and New Age organisations. Although fiercely Church of England, the practices of Midsomer churches are positively pre-Reformation, with a preponderance of mediæval frescoes of Hell, saintly relics, and the constant need for redemption through bloody sacrifice.

Trigger warnings for Midsomer are numerous and legendary and for a television detective show, quite unprecedented: "Includes traditional dancing that might offend some viewers… Contains several references to Witchcraft… There is mild violence, but most of the murders are offscreen."

This is all strange and interesting enough, and, on paper, *Midsomer* looks like a very fortean series, with countless references to strange and inexplicable phenomena and folk horror motifs. However, the reality is that these usually provide little more than a device for framing the show's outrageous murders. For example, while Series Seven offers us "The Green Man", "The Fisher King", and "The Straw Woman", it adds precious little to anyone's knowledge of actual folklore. Equally disappointingly, "The Ghost of Causton Abbey" turns out to be a fake – but at least we get to see a monk boiled to death. And in "The Sleeper Under the Hill", it turns out that it wasn't really the local Druids who disembowelled a man on a sacred stone as part of a pagan rite. "The Straw Woman" – proof, if it were needed, of *The Wicker Man*'s influence on the mood of the show – gives us horrific depictions of people supposedly spontaneously-combusting, but ultimately disavows such phenomena, along with real witchcraft, when the true nature of the crime is revealed.

LEFT: A Druidic sacrifice (or perhaps not) in "The Sleeper Under the Hill".

In fact, solving these cases usually involves understanding that the elaborate, seemingly ritual nature of any killing is usually in direct disproportion to its true motives. We are in a world of illusion – to use Crowley's terminology, *Magic* rather than *Magick* – of conjuring tricks gone wrong and where all cult leaders or New Agers who claim unusual powers are simply charlatans.

The only phenomena *Midsomer* seems genuinely to endorse are ghosts and second sight, and only because there is proof of their existence *within the world of the programme* and therefore no possible motive for killers to invent them. Perhaps these also are seen as more natural phenomena in a rural and often ancient landscape; after all, the fictional geography of the county also means frequent trips to lonely fields and prehistoric remains for ungodly rituals. Then there are the pilgrims' routes and trails older still. Land, its ownership and access, is often key to these stories, which offer further examples of the purely capitalist concerns and spiritual impoverishment that developers bring.

But I suspect there's something else truly odd about *Midsomer* – something that again links it to the seminal British folk horror of *The Wicker Man*.

The inhabitants of Midsomer County don't like 'outsiders', much. Circuses, fairs, foreign labourers and travellers – all are made to feel unwelcome, so the locals can get on with the more important business of hating each other. Sports are popular – from cycling and golf, to rowing and Rugby; but the appearance of any of them means someone is going to suffer a very public death. Country pursuits such as hunting, shooting and fishing, will also generally be attended by the shedding of human blood. Even gentler pastimes – making beer, cakes, cheese, and honey – will end with smiling rivalries turning to more than just strawberry jam stains.

For tourism's sake, though, such murderous passions are mostly kept under control for most of the year – until the summer months, when the county of Midsomer will experience half a dozen killing sprees. This seems always to have been the way – no one, whether locals or county police, ever seems particularly shocked – so presumably it always will be. Which makes me wonder what's really going on.

Does Midsomer County make a sacrifice of up to 20 citizens a year in order to be just left alone, its veneer of gentility hiding the ancient, murderous impulses that run deep? The police from Causton inevitably arrive, agree these people are crazy, mop up, and go home – until it all happens again. So are these regular outbreaks of bloody murder sacrifices to dark forces or elder gods that we're better off not knowing about?

The whole series, one might say, is offered up as a sacrifice to keep a lid on things: our viewing pleasure is indulged, our secret, murderous desires given temporary free reign – before being put back in their box once more at the end of each episode. Is Midsomer a (very messy) quantum realm of infinitely possible murderous encounters – and if so, why weren't we warned about our complicity?

In fact, we actually were given the clue way back in the beginning, in the second ever episode,[4] when Tom Barnaby asked: "Can you imagine committing murder for the sake of theatre?"

NOTES

1 "Destroying Angel".

2 "Murder On St Malley's Day". It's difficult to establish Midsomer's murder-rate; estimates have ranged from between twice and 10 times that of Greater London. But how do you gauge the size and population of a fictional place? Midsomer seems to be a combination of South Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, given the references and supposed proximities to London and Oxford. Causton is half Wallingford and half Thame, both in Oxfordshire and some 15 miles apart.

3 While in the UK the county is the real star of the show and bigger than any single character, abroad it's known as *The Inspector Barnaby Mysteries*. Nettles's Tom Barnaby was replaced at the end of season 13 by his cousin, John Barnaby.

4 "Death of a Hollow Man".

TIM WEINBERG lives in a small village where people still speak in hushed-tones of the Failed Freddo-Heist of 1976.

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Touched by a presence

Charles Foster finds this survey of scientific studies of ‘the unseen other’ to be invigorating, rigorous and highly readable, and argues that we must pay attention to outliers, stories that don’t

Presence

The strange science and true stories of the unseen other

Ben Alderson-Day

Manchester University Press 2025
Pb, 304pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781526184948

“When I count,” wrote TS Eliot in *The Wasteland*, “there is only you and I together. But when I look ahead… There is always another one walking beside you.” “Who,” he asked, “is the Third?”

That is the question posed too by psychologist Ben Alderson-Day in this invigorating, rigorous and highly readable survey of the common experience of the “other”.

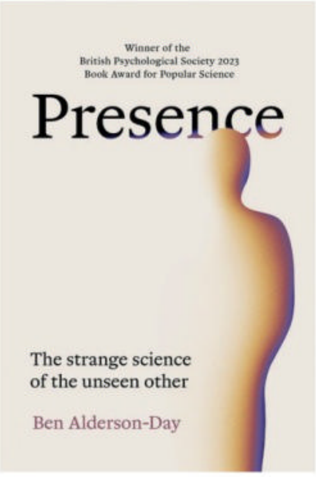
It’s a survey of a huge field. Some experiences come from extreme places: from explorers and athletes teetering on the edge of survivability.

We meet Frank Smythe who, climbing Everest without oxygen in 1933, was accompanied by an invisible companion who “completely eliminated all loneliness”, and was so real that Smythe turned to him to offer him Kendal Mint Cake. We meet Ron DiFrancesco, lifted to his feet and led down three flights of stairs just before the South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed on 9/11. We drink absinthe with the Swedish playwright, August Strindberg, whose other presence was sometimes a genial companion and interlocutor, but who sometimes imitated Strindberg for days at a time, and threatened to attack him in his bed.

We meet a “Doom Fairy” who gave a cave diver a foretaste of his own death as he made potentially fatal mistakes; a patient with Parkinson’s disease who sets the table every day for an absent guest; and Keira, a “voice-hearer” who feels presences as a “thickness in the air”.

We meet Karen, who speaks to “anything with a spirit”, and was told to “piss off” by a tree she spoke to on the morning of her interview with Alderson-Day; and the Hmong Laotian community in the US, many members of whom died in their sleep with grimaces on their faces, and who may have been scared to death by *Dab tsog*, a night spirit associated with sleep paralysis.

We visit bereaved relatives who feel their beloved dead at their shoulder, writers (such as Dickens and Pullman) who assert that their characters have lives of their own, children and adults with imaginary friends, and practitioners of tulpamancy who, by intense imaginative focus, create “tulpas” – entities that are emanations of the practitioner, but who have their own agency.



Winner of the
British Psychological Society 2023
Book Award for Popular Science

Presence

The strange science
of the unseen other

Ben Alderson-Day

Alderson-Day expertly and accessibly dissects the proffered explanations. Nothing, he concludes, works for every experience. Is the feeling of presence generated by dissociation, which can lead to a disconnectedness of experience and a feeling that different personas inhabit one body? That doesn’t fit well: such dissociation is commonly associated with amnesia, and yet “otherness” experiences are often recalled with great clarity.

Climbing Everest in 1933, Frank Smythe offered his invisible companion Kendal Mint Cake

Is the Swiss neurologist Peter Brugger correct in seeing “presence” as a type of duplication of one’s own body – a kind of heautoscopy, in which the double takes something from one’s own body, giving a sense of connection? That explanation’s problematic, thinks Alderson-Day: if the felt presence comes from us, why does it feel so distinctly *other*?

Did another Swiss team, led by Olaf Blanke, solve the puzzle? They identified three brain areas involved together in a feeling of presence: the temporo-parietal junction (which integrates sense data to produce a kind of body map), the insula (which processes information on internal states and is involved in self-reflection) and the superior parietal lobule, which plans and executes coordinated motor action.

The team devised an experiment in which subjects were touched by a robot (a kind of extension of the famous “rubber hand” illusion). They induced a felt presence in the subjects, which, the team concluded, was the result of a coalition of all three brain areas changing the subjects’ expectation of where their own bodies and movements should be.

It was impressive, but, says Alderson-Day, the puzzle remains. Presence is usually not a “touchy” feeling, and the findings don’t account for the emotional colour of many felt presences.

When he started his interrogation of these experiences, writes Alderson-Day, he thought “a single story would ultimately emerge; that despite its elusiveness, an essence of presence would step forward from the gloam”. It didn’t. There are stories that “don’t quite fit”.

Too many scientists (not worthy of the name) discard the outliers. Alderson-Day’s a proper scientist. He knows that really interesting science happens by paying particular attention to the data that don’t fit. Looking at things in the round, what has he seen? “A figure who is somehow tied to us. A mirror, but not quite.”

A fourth man walked alongside Ernest Shackleton and his two companions on their epic 36 hour journey across South Georgia until they reached safety. The three men did not see him, but they all sensed him.

When he was dictating *South*, his account of the expedition, Shackleton was noted for the precision of his prose – until he came to the Fourth Man. Then he stumbled. There was, says Alderson-Day, something there that *could not* be articulated: something not just ineffable and intangible, but too vast to be captured in words. Including, I suspect, in the words of a scientific paper.

I’m sure Alderson-Day wouldn’t follow me into this neurobiological mysticism. He’d think it a counsel of despair. I’m sure he’ll keep trying to learn from those outliers. I hope so. But I’d bet, as he tracks them deeper into the mystery of human being, that they’ll incontinently spawn more and more outliers.

Bigger on the inside

The background story of Doctor Who is as fascinating as the on-screen adventures

Exterminate! Regenerate!

The Story of Doctor Who

John Higgs

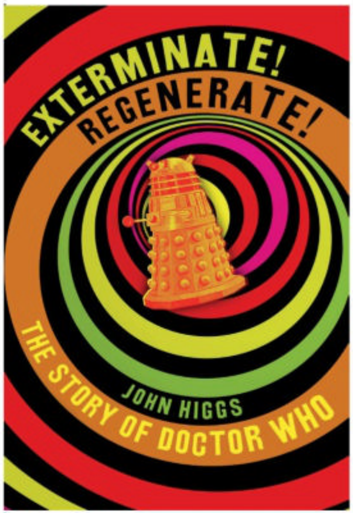
Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2025

Hb, 464pp, £25, ISBN 9781399614771

The story of *Doctor Who*. Again. We all know (now) the Doctor is a Timelord with two hearts who travels in a time/space machine called the Tardis, righting wrongs wherever they land. Do we really need another book to tell us all of this?

But hang on – the blurb tells us this is the "off-screen story [which] is equally extraordinary … This is a story of change, mystery and the importance of imaginary characters in our lives". Ah, that's a bit different then.

So we have a story that starts from 1958 for a bit of background setting, although our main area of interest kicks in at 1962 and takes us up to the end of 2024. The material is taken from a wide range of sources – interviews from official magazines, fanzines, TV shows and anything and everything in between. So the words and the thoughts that we are hearing are from those who were there at the time.



The author sets everything in the context of the period that the programme was being made and how world events and BBC internal politics shaped the show we all love so well.

The work could benefit from a story list as not all stories are covered, and sometimes there is information given about events taking place which would be better understood with knowledge of narrative context.

However, I assume the omission is simply due to the fact that any reader of a book such as this will have a good grasp of the stories and will more than likely have some general reference guide handy. And in the worst-case scenario they could actually look them up online.

The book is already nearly 500 pages long so perhaps this was an active decision to keep the page count and hence the (very reasonable) price down.

So does it do the job? Does it chart the history of a TV programme as an evolving entity pushed and prodded by many outside factors? Yes, yes, it does in spades! Every near cancellation is covered along with the sometimes frankly sheer luck (cancelling it would leave a hole in the schedule – may as well keep it going) that allowed it to survive.

No punches are pulled, from the questionable behaviour of some involved in the production of the show to the two families of Patrick Troughton.

This is an excellent book for fans of the programme wanting to know how the show has been produced, for fans of TV drama in general and for fans of social history. The book takes us up to the end of 2024 so the current iteration is not included – but you have to draw a line somewhere.

As John Higgs says at the end: "We can never resist a good story." So true at many levels.

Gordon Rutter

★★★★★

The Sleep Room

A Very British Medical Scandal

Jon Stock

The Bridge Steet Press 2025

Hb, 432pp, £25, ISBN 9780349128894

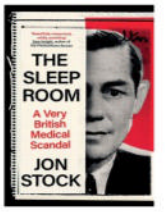
British psychiatry in the 1960s was in a state of flux: the old asylums looked more and more outdated when set against the recently-founded NHS, and psychiatrists themselves were critiquing the profession. Alongside radical anti-psychiatrist RD Laing, there was another man who could regularly be seen in the press expounding the virtues of his own idiosyncratic approach to mental illness. William Sargant, London-born and Cambridge-educated, was notorious for his unapologetically physicalist approach to mental health: he was a great advocate of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), lobotomy and deep sleep therapy. He loudly disdained talking therapies, reserving his most fierce criticism for psychoanalysis.

In his staunchly somatic approach to mental health, Sargant was no anomaly. His ideas matched a broader postwar enthusiasm for physical therapies, exemplified by the experiments of people like Manfred Sakel with insulin coma therapy. What was notable about Sargant, however, was that he remained committed to such methods even when they had fallen out of favour; he was referring people for lobotomies well into the 1970s.

The main focus of Stock's book is Sargant's "Sleep Room" in St Thomas's Hospital in London. In this twilight world, patients – the majority women – were put to sleep with a mixture of barbiturates and antipsychotics for up to five months, being woken only to wash, eat, or undergo ECT. Patients who failed to recover from their depression, anorexia or psychosis during this punishing regime might be referred for a lobotomy. Stock's meticulous research draws back the curtains on the Sleep Room for the first time, enhanced with first-hand accounts that are a welcome inclusion of patients' voices in the story.

Sargant's influence stretched well beyond the walls of St Thomas's. It was a short step from sleep therapy to mind control, as Stock shows, and his exploration of Sargant's links to UK and US intelligence agencies is gripping. Whether Sargant's Sleep Room was funded by the intelligence services or Big Pharma, he was certainly known to the CIA, appearing on a 1951 list of recommended medical professionals who might usefully be incorporated into the MKULTRA project.

Thankfully, Stock's superb writing ensures that the stories of individual patients are not lost within these tales of state intrigue.



Sargant's flagrant disregard for patient autonomy and medical ethics is made clear not only in stories from the Sleep Room, but also in anecdotes from those who met him in other contexts: one private patient reported him to the General Medical Council for sexual harassment, and Maxine Sanders, co-founder of Alexandrian Wicca, remembers him as "a dirty old man".

Stock's book is a significant contribution to the history of psychiatry and a pertinent reminder of the dangers of handing unchecked power to egomaniacal men.

Jennifer Wallis

★★★★★

Rome Before Rome

The Legends That Shaped the Romans

Philip Matyszak

Thames & Hudson 2025

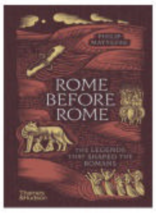
Hb, 224pp, £16.99, ISBN 9780500028315

Rome is a city of legends. This book is about the mythical legends of the city rather than the reality. Archæologists now agree that it was unlikely that Rome grew from a small community to a village, to a city, to a trading nation. As the author succinctly points out: "Had early Rome attempted to grow organically in the anarchic and violent conditions of early Iron Age Italy, the place would have lasted just long enough for someone to note it was worth looting" – an example of the dry wit of the author.

Emperor Augustus, after a lot of strife and civil wars, needed a history of Rome that described its foundation, its kings, and why he held the divine right as ruler over the known world – a guide to being Roman! Step forward one Titus Livius – known as Livy

– who was allowed to compile a history while having access to Roman archives; the combination of a "puff piece" and historical explanation for Rome's existence. Matyszak has compiled a brief guide to this and those of other classical authors who had something to say about it all.

It's effectively a list of Roman "kings" from the God Janus claiming dibs on the Western hill, a whistlestop visit from Hercules, and a refugee hero from the losing side of Troy – Aeneas. The latter was because Gussie wanted a link to ancient Greece yet not to favour it. The Empire was still at contention with Greece and didn't want to promote unrest. In order to flesh it all out – shenanigans ensued.



The oddities (to us) made for outstanding heroic fare, including the "single combat" between two sets of triplets to decide on dominance between Romans and the Albans who were linked by intermarriage and trade. Like the bizarre situation of the Sabine wives (once virgins) halting a battle with the Romans on the grounds that now they'd married Romans, they didn't want their own relations to make them widows!

With intelligence and dry wit, Matyszak has written a primer for classical Roman history. Reasoned, sourced and engaging, this book is not a textbook but bait to further interest in the ancient history of Rome. It has nice illustrations by Joe McLaren that act as bookmarks and basic maps, a brief list of dramatis personæ (both real and imaginary), and a good list of further reading. It is a fun read and provides some interesting etymology that I always enjoy!

Alan Cassady-Bishop

★★★★

Doc or Quack

Science and Anti-Science in Modern Medicine

Sander L Gilman

Reaktion Books 2025

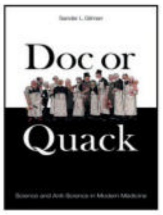
Hb, 360pp, £20, ISBN 9781836390152

The 19th-century Viennese medical establishment ostracised Dr Ignaz Semmelweis and destroyed his career. In 1865, Sander Gilman recounts in his compelling book, Semmelweis "was committed to an asylum by his medical colleagues, who disavowed all that he found and called him a quack". Semmelweis died the same year "beaten to death… by the [asylum] warders".

Semmelweis's suggestion? From 1847, he made doctors, students and midwives scrub their hands with chlorinated lime solution before moving from the autopsy room to the delivery room, and between contact with patients. The approach dramatically curtailed the spread of puerperal ("childbed") fever, which before Semmelweis, killed a fifth to a quarter of women giving birth.

Of course, medicine has advanced and hand hygiene is the foundation of modern infection control. But as Fort wrote in *Wild Talents*: "Nowadays one is smug with what one takes for progress, thinking of old-time physicians prescribing dried toads for ailments."

Gliman offers numerous examples that undermine that smugness. For instance, in 1949, Egas Moniz won the Nobel Prize for discovering "the therapeutic value of leucotomy in certain psychoses". Today leucotomy (lobotomy) is "the most controversial of all surgical interventions for mental illness".



In 1926, Johannes Fibiger, after being nominated annually for a decade, received the Nobel Prize for supposedly discovering that roundworms (intestinal parasites) caused stomach cancer. In fact, the tumours were not cancers and arose from a lack of vitamin A in the diets of his experimental rats.

Gilman, a cultural and literary historian, and a professor of psychiatry, eloquently exposes the undercurrents of intellectual arrogance, racism and sexism that can hinder medical advances. For instance, during the 1930s, Elizabeth Kenny, a self-trained Australian nurse, used warm wool compresses to relieve leg cramps in polio patients so that they could begin rehabilitation more rapidly than with standard care. The Australian medical establishment dismissed her as a quack and charlatan, and rejected her ideas. But Kenny's approach caught on in the USA and then worldwide. The 1946 Oscar-nominated film *Sister Kenny* told her story and five years later Kenny was proclaimed "the most admired woman in the world".

Doc or Quack is intelligent, insightful and thought-provoking. Gilman acknowledges his personal and intellectual debt to the pre-eminent medical historian Roy Porter. The book is reminiscent of Porter's accessible, but scientifically and historically robust, writings.

Semmelweis and Kenny were vindicated. Yet *Doc or Quack* left me wondering how many important advances the medical establishment dismissed as quackery. And how many of today's lauded treatments will become tomorrow's quack medicine.

Mark Greener

★★★★

Discoveries of the Hidden Hand

Gary M Rowe

Independently published/Amazon 2025

Pb, 356pp, £28.12, ISBN 9798315025160

Gary Rowe has been in the forefront of amateur research into paranormal phenomena in the UK for more than 70 years, accumulating an almost unparalleled range of cases involving different types of psychical phenomena, UFO-related phenomena and, inevitably, fortean phenomena. Over the years, his detailed investigations have been reported in journals, many talks and lectures.

DISCOVERIES OF THE HIDDEN HAND
7
GARY M ROWE

Readers will note how what begin as fairly "routine" investigations into a "supernatural" phenomenon soon branch into unexpected and often meaningful directions. Rowe himself records them as surprisingly personal, participating in – as opposed to impartially conducting – an investigation. These sometimes astonishing encounters with what Rowe is comfortable in calling "the supernatural" seem to be a form of the well-known "observer" effect. Orthodox it is not, but this is his story and his method.

In this volume, Rowe gathers the most significant of his discoveries and reviews in some detail what they meant to him. He is quite open about his own convictions; for example the extraordinary number of "coincidences" in his life and investigations. "I don't believe in luck," he writes, referring to the eponymous "hand" of the title. "I believe that there is a hidden hand in the affairs of man."

UFOs and psychical phenomena are the focus of the two main sections of the book, often illuminating well-known cases with new or different interpretations – including such variations as "time warps", phantom sounds, odd fires, or UFO propulsion systems. The third section broadens out to many different discussions, including numerology, coincidences, divination, holy wells and disappearances.

Rowe concludes with the fascinating case reported by Ken Webster in his 1989 book *The Vertical Plane* (extracted in **FT108:40-44**). This involved curious messages supposedly sent across time from someone who lived in Webster's home in the year 1521. They were discovered on a primitive BBC Micro computer and on notes "found" in the house. Rowe's own investigation manages to make the incident even more mysterious.

His presentation carefully avoids bombarding the reader with acronyms, bewildering speculations, sensationalism or self-aggrandisement; instead, it is eminently readable, especially by anyone new to such subjects.

Even if you disagree with his conclusions, he wants to show you precisely how he arrived at them. His determination, enthusiasm and inventiveness are often tested and occasionally rewarded.

Anyone interested in the work and thoughts of a "paranormal investigator" could learn something from Rowe's overview of his own endeavours as he asks important questions about mysterious and meaningful experiences.

For such an information-packed book though, it really should have had an index.

Bob Rickard

★★★

Scientifical isn't good enough

When supposedly 'scientific' paranormal investigators muddy the water with psychic beliefs they lose all credibility, says **Sharon Hill**

The Ghost Lab

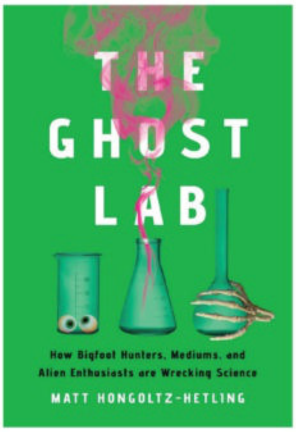
How Bigfoot Hunters, Mediums and Alien Enthusiasts are Wrecking Science

Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling

Hachette 2025

Hb, 352pp, £25, ISBN 9781541703971

New England was the birthplace of paranormal investigation in the US (via the Warrens and TAPS/Ghost Hunters) and a hotbed of UFO encounters (Exeter incident and Betty & Barney Hill). New Hampshire is where journalist Hongoltz-Hetling follows a small group of experimenters and experiencers as they attempt to make a go of a paranormal investigation centre from 2007 to 2022. The Kitt Research Institute (KRI) was led by arrogant and opinionated Andy Kitt, and included a troubled contactee, Mike, and three mediums, Beau, Val and Antje. Later, they opened a Center for Consciousness Studies with the intent of doing their own parapsychological research.


THE GHOST LAB
How Bigfoot Hunters, Mediums, and Alien Enthusiasts are Wrecking Science
MATT HONGOLTZ-HETLING

The "Bigfoot" namedrop in the subtitle did not deserve inclusion since it's an insignificant portion of the content. The sciencey imagery on the cover suggests the content relates to experimental science of the paranormal, but this is also a misrepresentation.

The through-line of the book is the effort to keep a niche paranormal business afloat and the personal relationships within the group. The gnarly difficulties illustrate several inherent problems at the intersection of paranormal beliefs, science and society. The author's thesis is that the eroding trust in American institutions, exemplified by the rejection of traditional sources of knowledge (universities, mainstream religious communities and government agencies), was linked to the rise in paranormal do-it-yourself efforts. I was not sold on this idea.

In 2010, I documented well over 1,000 amateur research and investigation groups (ARIGs) in the US, the majority of which claimed to use "science" or "scientific methods" in their quest to find "proof" of the paranormal. Their aim was to pin down definitive evidence and establish themselves as the local "experts". By being "scientifical" – pretending to be scientific but failing – they effectively convinced a non-scientific-minded audience that they were serious researchers. ARIGs engaged in playing scientist, setting up their own "societies", and presenting themselves as authorities by regurgitating content from their preferred circle of knowledge and Wikipedia. All of this played out in the story of the KRI.

The author did not strongly convey the impression that he was well versed on the history of paranormal investigation, since the content almost entirely ignores the explorations from 2010 to the present on the influence of media and the Internet. He presents just enough detail in the narrative and tangents to be interesting, but a knowledgeable reader will notice the fuzzy connections and questionable loose ends.

The members of KRI claimed to be critical thinkers regarding their methods. Instead, they engaged in entirely unscientific ventures. Andy was self-training as a scientist but known for his subjective views and strong opinions. Beau was paid to remove spirits from houses and to teach classes on mediumship. They explored table-tipping and past-life regression, and the three psychics relied on spirit guides. They generated funds by hosting ever more dubious events, offering access to a psychomanteum, hosting Reiki practitioners, and aimed to sell crystals and other Spiritualist items in a shop that never materialised. Mike, the alien experiencer, counselled other experiencers and also successfully petitioned to erect the Hills' historical highway sign.

As with all ARIGs, KRI failed to produce scientific results, or to remain financially solvent. They rejected certain realities that were blatantly obvious, like the need for insurance and legal protections, and the admitted violent behaviour of one of their colleagues. Early on, the reader can see that the original premise for KRI was flawed. But KRI members would never see it. Eventually, they could not continue with each other. Their story, however, made for an engrossing chronicle of how a top ARIG evolved and imploded.

A reasonable conclusion is that you can't institutionalise the 21st-century paranormal trend because it relies on dubious facts, ambiguous definitions and loose boundaries of evidence. ARIGs took advantage of the poor science literacy of a confused society coping with fears of modernity and the degradation of social structures. It is not ARIGs but the overtly consumer landscape that is wrecking science. The author states, without foundation, that there was a "triumph of paranormalism over institutionalism in New Hampshire", suggesting that if we stop ignoring paranormal beliefs, things will improve. Of the many lessons and thoughtful ideas in this book, that one is specious. Instead, we must cope with an ever more complicated and perplexing environment. Paranormal belief is ultimately a symptom, not a cause, of social anxiety.

★★★★

Playing at the World 2E Volume 2

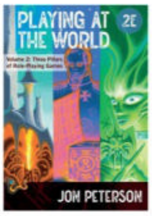
Three Pillars of Role-Playing Games

Jon Peterson

MIT Press 2025

Pb, 794pp, £52, ISBN 9780262552318

In the first volume of *Playing at the World 2E* (FT451), Jon Peterson told the story of the origins of *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*), the game that pioneered the fantasy role-playing genre. Dividing the book's first edition into two halves, Peterson devoted the first volume to the history of the game itself, focusing on the people and communities that contributed to its development. Now, in the second volume, Peterson turns to the conceptual history of *D&D*.



This volume's three sections each cover one of what Peterson calls the "three pillars" of role-playing games. The first pillar is the game's fantasy setting. This section examines the disparate influences that contributed to the fantasy world of *D&D*, a world that draws on myth, folklore and multiple traditions of fantasy adventure fiction without corresponding exactly to any of them. The second pillar is the game's system – the rules and conventions of play by which participants determine the actions that take place in the game's imaginary world. The third pillar discusses the concept of the player character, an idea that developed through other types of game before emerging in *D&D*.

Many of the ideas introduced by *D&D* are so widespread in popular culture, from video games to comics and television, that it's interesting to be reminded that there was a time when "hit points" or "experience points" didn't exist, or when the genre of dungeon-fantasy was seen as weird and unfamiliar. Peterson's ludic and cultural history sheds light on the origins of game elements that have become so widespread they can sometimes seem inevitable.

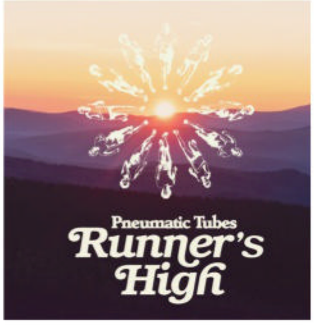
Like its predecessor, this second volume is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of games.

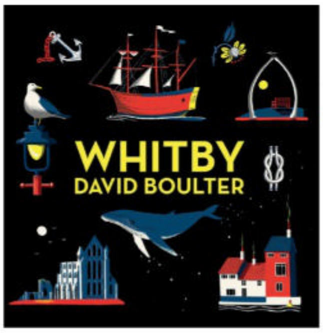
James Holloway

★★★★★

THE HAUNTED GENERATION

BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY





Some Everyday Hazards
THE SUNNY SMILES THREE

DEADMAN'S GHOST •
A VOTIVE OFFERING

Lost in the Garden
Music for the Book

"In the 1960s and 1970s, running was a slightly hippy-ish subculture in America," explains Jesse Chandler. "I have a book from that period, and it actually talks about what runners should do when they're heckled by passers-by. They were seen as 'freaks' by some! Runners like Steve Prefontaine and Bill Rodgers were freewheeling rebels on the fringes, and Jim Fixx and Dr George Sheehan became gurus for what was – and still is – a meditative and spiritual practice, almost akin to yoga."

Jesse's new album *Runner's High*, recorded under his nom-de-plume of Pneumatic Tubes, explores the New Age connections of the mid-20th century jogging explosion with shimmering aplomb. When he's not pounding the pavements himself, Jesse is the flautist with both Midlake and Mercury Rev, and the album weaves his immaculate woodwind skills into electronic plateaux that perfectly encapsulate the elusive, long-distance euphoria of the title. It's also intended as a tribute to Jesse's father Dave, whose own passion for running made him a familiar figure in the family's famously hippy-affiliated hometown of Woodstock, NY.

"My dad was part of that whole scene," nods Jesse. "He kept a running journal for over 40 years, from his first day as a runner until he passed in 2018. My mom has them, and every time I visit I crack open a different year." Released by Ghost Box spin-off label Belbury Music, *Runner's High* includes guest vocals from Midlake founder Tim Smith and comes complete with a self-explanatory bonus disc entitled *Warm Up and Cool Down*. Those suitably shamed into putting away the Chocolate Hob-Nobs should do a few gentle stretching exercises then jog slowly to belburymusic.greedbag.com.

If you're still in holiday mood, however, then David Boulter's mini-album *Whitby* might be the perfect soundtrack. David plays keyboards with legendary Nottingham lounge lizards Tindersticks, but his latest solo release was inspired by a visit to North Yorkshire's spookiest seaside resort. Influenced more by the "natural drama" of the coastline than the Goth Weekend and the Dracula exhibition, David has poured his memories into a collection of soothing instrumentals for strings and woodwind. Climb the 199 steps to claypipemusic.co.uk. And for further nature-based contemplation, I also recommend *Ronsack*, the new modular synth album from Shropshire farmer Tom Kennedy. Recording as Swansither, Tom has composed an atmospheric homage to a thousand-year-old oak tree on the edge of his land, and the social changes it has witnessed: from the Domesday Book to the Industrial Revolution and beyond. Rake over the acorns at swansither.bandcamp.com.

Up in Leeds, the resolutely unhurried Sunny Smiles Three have released their first album since 2020. *Some Everyday Hazards* is a terrific collection of twinkly psychedelic folk that should delight fans of Caravan or Roy Harper, comprising – in their own words – "tales of mystery, imagination, death, fighting, the Ark of the Covenant and Little Richard". My favourite song? The exquisite 'Mr Fodgety', a disarmingly sinister tribute to a (hopefully) imaginary nocturnal visitor. "With the night-light shining on your wall / Ancient worries shouldn't worry you at all"… Throw back your candlewick bedspread and head immediately to thesunnysmilesthree.bandcamp.com for further unconvincing reassurance.

Elsewhere, I've been listening to *This Material Moment*, a stunning automatic-writing inspired album by Newcastle electro-folkie Jayne "Me Lost Me" Dent; and to *A Votive Offering*, a new collection from Deadman's Ghost. This latter LP is the work of Belfast-based Jason Mills, using traditional Irish folklore as the basis for some genuinely scary soundscapes. Meanwhile, Haunted Generation veterans should salute Alan Gubby, genial overlord of the Buried Treasure label, who has given a limited physical release to the soundtrack from ITV's alarming 1975 children's series *Sky*. There might just be a handful left at buriedtreasure.bandcamp.com.

Last August, I enthused over Adam S Leslie's novel *Lost in the Garden* (**FT447:57**), and the book has since deservedly won the prestigious Nero Award for Fiction. Recording as Berlin Zebra, Adam has now created an original soundtrack for this creepy tale of "summer hauntology", and it's a delightful melange of mellotron, school piano and shortwave radio: what Adam calls "heat-hazy, summer afternoon nap sounds".

"Back in the Nineties, my friend Peter and I used to make sound collages on C90 cassettes," he explains. "We'd have record player, TV and radio all running at the same time, and we'd move the tape recorder around the room to shift the balance. So I wanted to evoke that kind of dreamlike atmosphere." This time using his own music and field recordings as source material, Adam has crafted the ideal accompaniment to his book: head to berlinhorse.bandcamp.com, and feel free to break into a brisk trot whenever the ghost of Mrs Kelway comes crashing through the shrubbery.

Visit the Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era to hauntedgeneration@gmail.com

Dog's eye view

Man's best friend takes centre stage in an atmospheric dog-centric horror that plays from a canine perspective, while Troma's most celebrated creation makes a belated return to the big screen

Good Boy

Dir Ben Leonberg, USA 2025
In UK cinemas from 10 Oct

Pets hold special places in our lives and hearts – anyone who has or has had a beloved cat or dog will be able to attest to just how much they enrich our existence.

In the world of cinema, pets have a long history as both lead performers and supporting actors, and while it may only be fiction, few things can cement an antagonist's wretchedness more than someone hurting their pet, with such a misdeed even serving as the catalyst for an entire franchise, as was the case with the *John Wick* film series.

In horror, pets have also made lasting impressions, Stephen King in particular being responsible for unsettling readers and viewers alike with the calamitous canine Cujo's rabid rampage in the eponymous book and film and the resurrection of frightful feline Church foreshadowing the harrowing climax of *Pet Sematary*.

With *Good Boy*, Ben Leonberg (who co-wrote the script with Alex Cannon) makes his feature directorial debut by offering the unusual premise of viewers experiencing a horror narrative from the point of view of a dog, namely the film-maker's own canine companion, Indy.

> *The film works much better than most people would have predicted*

Relying on his natural expressiveness, the furry lead is unenhanced by CGI and Leonberg instead relies on the camerawork to convey the dog's perspective from his eye level, as he experiences what appears to be a haunted house, with his increasingly unwell owner being relegated to always appearing out of focus or out of frame.

Given that dogs are unable to conveniently spew exposition on behalf of lazy writers, the film weaves a mystery that plays heavily on what man's best friend senses and sees that we perhaps do not, using the inherent unease associated with liminal spaces to create a thoroughly unnerving atmosphere.

While a lean runtime of 73 minutes reduces the film's chances of overplaying its central conceit, the risk of such a high-concept film losing audience interest is still significant; the only context is provided by snippets of dialogue between a few human characters in the background, while much of the narrative is left open to interpretation in a way that builds a genuine momentum that's impressively maintained from start to finish.

Good Boy could easily have become a disappointing case of novelty for the sake of novelty, but the way the atmosphere is built and the sense of dread sustained works exceedingly well in terms of suspending one's disbelief, spinning a creepy tale in an eerie setting that works much better than most people would have predicted.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

The Toxic Avenger

Dir Macon Blair, USA 2023
In cinemas

Subversive to the nth degree, Troma Entertainment has made a name for itself by gleefully exposing filmgoers to all manner of gory, lewd and, above all, silly merriment since 1974, and the company has carried on with reckless – some would say tasteless – abandon throughout the subsequent decades to cement its status as the forerunner in shlocktastic offerings that shock the masses and delight the company's loyal followers.

Troma's most successful title is undoubtedly 1984's *The Toxic Avenger*, which spawned several sequels and even the animated series *Toxic Crusaders* in 1991, complete with its own toy line; because that was the sort of thing you could get away with in the early Nineties.

In this new take on Toxie, we are introduced to Winston Gooze (Peter Dinklage), who plays a downtrodden janitor at a big company run by callous CEO Bob Garbinger (Kevin Bacon), who lives large while his low-ranking employees struggle to get by and the surrounding environment is poisoned by the company's toxic waste.

Struggling to connect with his stepson, things only get worse for Winston when he learns that he has a perfectly curable disease, which his employer's insurance policy unfortunately refuses to cover because while this is a fictional tale, it is after all still set in America.

One thing leads to another, and before long, Winston becomes a hideously deformed creature of superhuman size and strength, realising that his newfound powers – complete with radioactive mop action – have put him in a position to clean up

Harbinger's mess for good.

As the nonsensical mayhem ensues, Peter Dinklage approaches the role of Winston with gusto and emotional heft, ensuring that Toxie is portrayed with humanity and sincerity, making him the clear standout among the protagonists.

In terms of the baddies, Kevin Bacon clearly relishes playing a Bryan Johnson-esque incarnation of corporate evil, surrounded by a rabble of maniacal henchmen, the ringleader of whom is portrayed by Elijah Wood, who continues to live his best weird life as he emulates Rocky Horror's Riff Raff with mixed results.

As is par for the course with Troma, the self-serious need not apply, as there is no intention to make self-important arthouse cinema here, and if you are going into this expecting even an iota of high-mindedness, you will leave infuriated at how purposefully immature Troma proves to be once more.

Instead, the charm of *The Toxic Avenger* – and, indeed, Troma in general – is how a preposterous premise is unapologetically approached with dedication, making the most of a devoted crew and cast whose sole mission is to make you laugh until your sides hurt and your toes curl from the self-aware cringe and bloody mayhem.

As such, the humour is of the utmost importance, and while not every joke lands, there is such an abundance of subversive silliness on display here that fans are likely to enjoy what writer/director Macon Blair has to offer; however, existing followers of Blair may find that the tonal shift from his previous efforts is simply too severe to stomach. The gore is sporadic but gruesomely entertaining, putting practical effects at the forefront in a subversive yet classic tale of the unassuming hero who rises to the occasion, all of it wrapped in a type of humour that is not so much of the toilet variety as all the way down in the sewer.

Slyly winking at the viewer, as always, the film nonetheless puts in play pertinent themes about the evils of late capitalism and the unacceptable things we have somehow come to accept; however, these never become ham-fisted or sanctimonious: we are all in on the joke, and we laugh because otherwise we would cry.

It may not reach the heights of the fever dream of vintage Troma, but the belated release of this new *Toxic Avenger* nonetheless showcases that the company is still very much alive and kicking and still refusing to grow up and behave like an adult – and what a relief that is.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★☆☆

TELEVISION

FT's couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** assess the small screen's current fortean offerings

Alongside its usual fare (old movies, box-office failures and hugely successful homegrown niche-dramas) Netflix has been slowly developing a nifty line in deep-dive documentary series. Among the pop-culture and true-crime there are quite a few strands of interest to the fortean.

Seasoned connoisseurs of forteana will recall the case of Linda Napolitano (nee Cortile), the 40-year-old mum of two from New York City who in 1989 claimed to have been repeatedly abducted from her bed by those (at the time seemingly omnipresent) pesky Greys (**FT154:25, 313:71, 315:71**). *The Manhattan Alien Abduction* takes this most alien of stories and makes it the most human of tales in this three-part series (**FT461:24-25**). The opening scenes feature uncomfortable close-ups of Linda and her friend-turned-adversary Carol Rainey, former wife of Budd Hopkins, as they size up to each other and prepare their testimonies for the viewers.

First to give evidence is Napolitano: focussing on one particular event in which she claimed to have been floated from her bedroom window up into a craft that hovered over Manhattan, which at the time was experiencing a huge power-cut. What distinguishes her account from the multitude of others at the time was the impressive number of witnesses, one of whom was reported to be the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Javier Perez-de Cuellar.

Napolitano's taste for fame preceded her abductions, as Rainey noticed

This account quickly grabbed the attention of the abduction phenomenon's arch inquisitor, Budd Hopkins, who grasped it with customary zeal. Napolitano becomes Hopkins's 'exhibit A', the star witness wheeled out to all the talk shows (Oprah, Geraldo, Lake). As Napolitano's celebrity status got bigger, so did her tales. It all seemed too good to be true, and indeed the cracks soon started to appear: questions over the veracity of both witnesses and their testimonies deepened the already gaping chasm between sceptics and believers, while on a domestic level divisions opened up between Napolitano and her family and Hopkins and Rainey.

Rainey's evidence hinges on a coil – an alleged implant up one of Napolitano's nostrils, visible on X-ray. Hopkins is convinced that this is an artfully inserted alien artefact, whereas Rainey contests that it is a small spring taped in place by an increasingly desperate Napolitano. At this point, we are taken back to Linda's earlier life, accompanied by a sub-Motown 1960s soundtrack which transpires to be none other than Linda herself in the guise of singer Lynn Long, who was signed to the Mercury label and part of the music scene before giving it all up for marriage. Her taste for fame proceeded her abductions and is clearly visible in her natural confidence in front of the camera, noticed by Rainey, herself a film maker.

Where the series scores highest is in its treatment of the story. The fantastical elements aside, it treats the narrative as it would a true crime documentary, with key players each sharing their truths as they see them, straight to camera with lots of archive pics, as their respective narrative threads entwine then unravel. Highly recommended.

Dante's INFERNO
Hunt Emerson with Kevin Jackson
KNOCKABOUT
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Samuel Taylor Coleridge & Hunt Emerson
knockabout
HUNT EMERSON
PHENOMENOMIX
UFOs & ALIENS, RAINS OF FISH, BIGFOOT, GHOSTS, CROP CIRCLES - IN COMICS!
KNOCKABOUT
Lives of the GREAT OCCULTISTS
KEVIN JACKSON & HUNT EMERSON
KNOCKABOUT
THE COMIC BOOK Lady Chatterley's LOVER!
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Saying UAP

It's high time we settle on an acceptable way to say "UAP" now that it's the accepted nomenclature for airborne flying weirdness.

UFO was sonically satisfying whether you said the letters individually or made a phonetic word out it. It has a wonderful finality in the "O" and the phonetic variation of "You-Foe" adds a layer of menace appropriate to the more threatening scenarios surrounding alien intent.

UAP, however, has a less appealing sequence. Saying the letters "U-A-P" has an inadvertent "ape" sound if you rush it. When we say the individual letters with deliberation, we end with an emphasised "pee". A phonetic pronunciation is, to me, also fraught with uncertainty. Is it "You-App"? "Uh-App"? Or if we use the "ua" pronunciation from guacamole, "Whapp"! All are sounds that imply the facial impact of a thrown custard pie. But perhaps appropriate shapewise.

Thoughts about this out in the world?

William Hohauser
New York

Francis Hotel Explanation

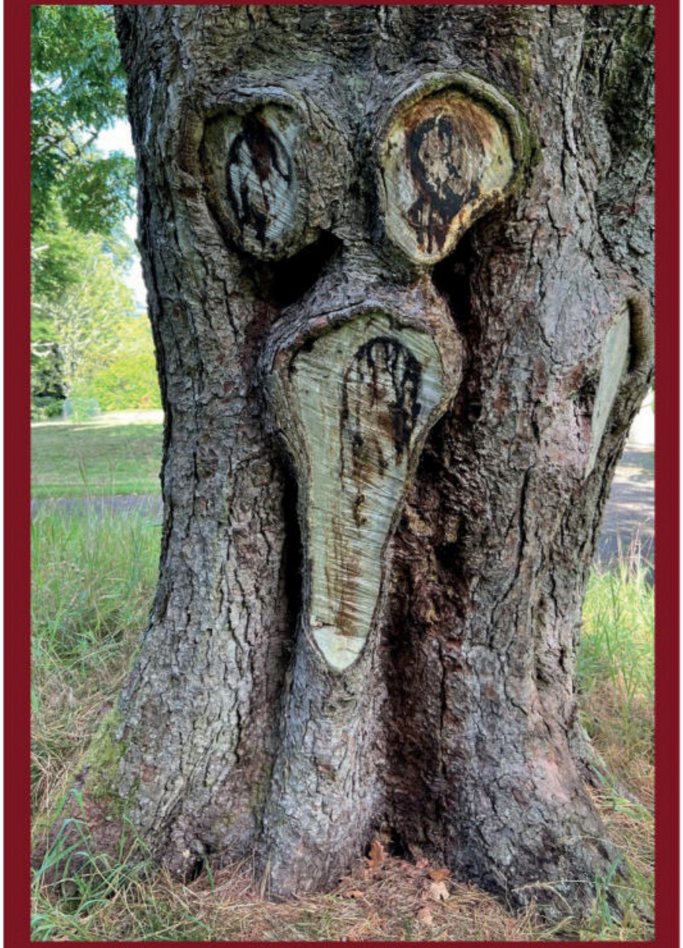
Interesting that one letter (Tooth Transmissions **FT460:61**) may offer an explanation for another phenomenon described in another letter (Francis Hotel, Bath, **FT460:62**). Could a dodgy connection in a speaker have led to it picking up a local AM radio signal, providing De Waal with his weird experience?

I remember back in the 1980s I had a knackered old pioneer system that I'd pulled together that often picked up random segments of broadcast, which got me thinking. Much to my surprise, a quick web search revealed that there are a number of AM radio stations still broadcasting in the UK that could provide a source for the haunting, but gentle, Molly Parden song.

I'm unsure whether this connection would stand up to scrutiny by someone with any real understanding of electronics, but a corroded solder seems as likely an explanation as any.

Dave Pratt
Durham County

SIMULACRA CORNER



During a walk around the grounds of a botanical garden in Scotland, Geraint Edwards stumbled across this homage to Edvard Munch's *The Scream.*

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking68@gmail.com**

Scepticism and good manners

Re-Alan Cassady-Bishop's letter [**FT461-63**]. Sensible scepticism should be welcomed in forteana. If it makes sense and fits the phenomena. A good example would be the *Daedalus* sea serpent explained as a skim feeding sei whale: it makes perfect sense, and modern-day photos of such match the descriptions of the monster at the time. A bad example would be trying to explain upright walking, rock throwing sasquatches as 'bears' or the Hopkinsville goblins as great horned owls, both of which require mental gymnastics on an Olympic level.

What angers me is the downright pompous attitude of some (not all) sceptics and the seeming mindset that anybody who doesn't agree with them is mad or deluded. When I began my investigation of the Waverley Abbey dragons case I thought the witnesses had mistaken a large bird seen flying at night. I didn't start from the assumption they were mentally ill. It soon became apparent that whatever they had seen it was not a bird. Approaching a case with the mindset that anybody witnessing anything strange is mad is a ridiculous approach to data and if everybody thought that way *Fortean Times* would not exist.

It also seems to me that many self-styled sceptics are amazingly rude, both in letters pages and in online forums. They seem not to have an actual interest in the subject as much as they have an interest in mocking those who study it or have experienced it.

Richard Freeman
Zoological Director, Centre for Fortean Zoology, Exeter

Alien abductions

The Jenny Randles article about fœtal memory and the Oz Factor in regard to UFO experiences from [**FT432:32**] brought to mind my idea regarding "abduction" experiences potentially being a distorted memory of birth by Cæsarean Section. Could the experience of the procedure – the security and comfort of the womb being suddenly ripped apart, the baby lifted bodily into bright light and the sterile environment of the maternity unit, being handled and weighed by midwifery staff before being returned to the mother's arms – have parallels with abductees being taken from their homes or vehicles into some alien craft, then subjected to impersonal "medical experiments"?

If the "normal" experience of the womb can create a lasting fœtal memory, is it beyond the realms of possibility that the perhaps more "traumatic" and wrenching experience of a Cæsarean birth could imprint a similarly long-lasting memory, but perhaps of a more disturbing, fearful nature?

Stan Sweeney
Lanarkshire

Something over Huddersfield

In the summer and autumn of 1998, my friend Chris Ellis and I did some UFO skywatches on the moors above Outlane, a district of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

All we saw were passenger jets, police helicopters and satellites, but this was sparked off by an experience Chris shared with his mother some time before on the same desolate moorlands. By their own admission, they were there to watch for UFOs, as they had both always been fascinated by the subject. They found a small lane, next to some deserted cottages, and overlooking a body of water. After a while they noticed what appeared to be a very bright star in the distance and, on the off-chance that it was something else, Chris flashed his car headlights and, to their amazement, the light started moving towards them. Chris recalls that the object passed silently directly over them and, talking about it later, they both recalled that it had seemed circular in shape.

In the following weeks and months, Chris returned to the moors looking for the exact location. There were a few country lanes, but none of them had deserted cottages on them and none of them overlooked a body of water. I suggested Scammonden Dam nearby, but Chris couldn't find their location as they remembered it there or anywhere near it.

This reminds me of the Devereaux family's experience related in TV's *Shaun Ryder on UFOs* [**FT447:61**]. They took Shaun and alien abductee Travis Walton to the scene where the family thought they were at the time of their close encounter and missing time experience. But they remembered being on a long, straight road with white lines down the centre, situated on a slight incline, and there wasn't anywhere like that in that vicinity. As Rachael Deveraux recounted in her regression: "We're on a road in the sky that doesn't exist."

Anyway, fast-forward to Saturday 26 May 2012, at around 3.30pm, and I was sitting in my parents' garden, in the centre of the Holmfield/Ovenden/Illingworth areas of Halifax, gazing up at a passenger jet high in the sky, when I caught sight of something else.

To me, it seemed to be a V-shaped object which flew across the aircraft's jet-trail, and then appeared to stop, spin around 180 degrees, and then face the cockpit of the jet. About one second after this, I looked away and blinked, as the Sun was in my eyes, and by the time I looked back again, this object had vanished, and all I could see was the original aircraft continuing on its course.

Had this been a UFO?

I made a sketch of the sighting and a letter of enquiry and sent it to my local newspaper, as I was interested to know if anyone else had seen it. The newspaper explained that they would only print my letter, on the proviso that they could make it into a story, and I was worried they would photograph me gazing wistfully at the sky with a caption reading something like 'The Man Who Believes in Little Green Men', so I decided against it.

I emailed Nick Pope, formerly the UFO desk officer for the MOD, who had written the book *Open Skies, Closed Minds*, and he informed me that the Government no longer investigate UFO sightings, but that I could contact BUFORA (British UFO Research Association) with the details of the sighting, which I did.

I also sent copies of the letter and drawing to Manchester Airport, Leeds/Bradford Airport, the Civil Aviation Authority and West Yorkshire Police and received a reply from one of them: Manchester Airport, which I duly sent on to BUFORA.

The letter was from R Sallaway, of the ATC Incident Investigation for Manchester Airport, which read:

Dear Mr Owens,

Thank you for your detailed report concerning a possible sighting of an unidentified flying object. As the ATC Incident Investigator here at Manchester, I have looked at our radar replay equipment and can confirm that, at exactly the time you made your sighting, there were two aircraft in pretty much exactly the position you have detailed. Both aircraft were high level and were known traffic to the ATC Service Provider thus the appropriate vertical separation was being applied between the two aircraft.

The radar does not show any erratic behaviour of aircraft for a period of 10 mins before your observation time to 10 mins after in the area you mention.

Also, I duly received a reply from Mark Easen, the investigations coordinator for BUFORA, and the following comments from Mark are from two separate emails he sent to me, which I have edited together.

He wrote: *I have received your letter and sketch now, thank you very much for that. And thank you for attaching the response you received from Manchester ATC. It will be interesting to see if Leeds/Bradford Airport and the CAA also respond, and if their information corroborates that from Manchester or not.*

Considering the reply from Manchester ATC first: they are saying that there were two 'high altitude' aircraft in that approximate position which were known to them and recorded on radar. Presumably one of them was the 'passenger jet' with its contrails behind it. which you observed and identified.

However, I feel we cannot be sure that the second aircraft that was recorded on radar was the 'V' shaped object that you noticed. It is possible that if this second aircraft referred to by Manchester was at a higher altitude than the first (and they do say that a vertical separation would be in place) then it may have been too small to be visible to the naked eye.

Plus the ATC states that "the radar does not show any erratic behaviour of aircraft" and that would therefore suggest that the V-shaped object you observed behaving erratically was not picked up on radar if the ATC are correct.

Looking at the sketch you kindly sent to me, and noting the object's small size as drawn and lack of detail, it seems as though the V or 'boomerang' shaped object was either very high up, very small or a combination of both. I am in complete agreement with you when you noted in your letter that "it seemed to be twice the size of the plane, though it could have simply been at a lower altitude, making it appear larger".

It is always very difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty the actual size or height of an object where neither of these two parameters is known. I would say that there is a very real possibility that the object could have indeed been at a lower altitude than the jet, and that it could easily have actually been smaller in size as well, despite appearing apparently larger.

Considering now the reported movement characteristics of the object – "made several rapid turns to left and right"; "sped past the plane then came to a dead halt in a fraction of a second; "spun round 180 degrees"; "I took my eyes off it and when I looked again it was gone". These do not sound like anything a conventional manned aircraft would be capable of doing, but are there any other conventional objects which might behave in a manner such as this?'

To me, these movements would be perfectly normal for something such as an aerobatic or 'stunt' kite. As you probably know, these highly manœuvrable kites with two control lines attached to its control surfaces can be made to perform just about anything the pilot wants. If one of these (which is maybe two metres in wingspan) was around a hundred metres or so up in the sky, I would say that it could possibly appear to be 'twice as big as a jet plane'.

I know this as I used to belong to a radio-controlled model aircraft club and although I did not feel comfortable flying a model this high up/far away I have personally seen model planes which are being flown so high they just looked like a little dot in the sky. And similarly, kites could have a very long control line. If the 'pilot' of this kite was not readily noticeable then the fact that it could have been a kite might not be considered at the time. Looking back on it now, do you think there is any possibility that it could have been a fairly high up aerobatic kite which you observed?

Although that would be the most likely/probable explanation that fits what has been reported, I feel that we should not rule out the possibility that it could have been a remote/radio-controlled plane. The V-shape observed

perhaps could have been its highly swept-back wings. If it were battery-powered then it would have made little or no sound.

And there is also a possibility that it could have been a military or law enforcement drone aircraft although I would say that the flight characteristics seem to be a little too erratic for this explanation considering a drone's probable larger size and operational requirements.

So in summary I would say that it seems to me from the evidence available that the object could have been either a stunt kite or a model aircraft of some sort. Either of these two objects would be capable of exhibiting the movement characteristics reported and being that apparent size, without being detected on an airport radar. This would however only be a 'possible explanation' rather than a 'definitive identification' but I feel that this is definitely a working hypothesis.

I guess you could check with Manchester ATC if you wanted, to see if one of the two airliners they had on radar was travelling in the same direction as the one that you saw in the sky. That should identify that one, especially if they gave you the altitudes as well, and if it was the lower of the two, as this would mean that the second airliner was higher and therefore was probably why you did not notice it.

If you are convinced that the mystery V-shaped object you saw was a large piloted craft that was not picked up on radar (or was but the ATC are not letting on) and it was flying at the same or a similar altitude to the commercial jet you identified (difficult to tell for sure) then it might be worth trying to speak to the pilots of the passenger jet to see if they spotted anything. Although I'm not sure if the ATC or the airline company would be in a position to disclose the identity or contact details of the pilots, and even if you were able to approach the pilots I would be very surprised if they would reveal any information (even if they had seen anything strange).

It seems that professional pilots are very reluctant to report anything strange which might lead to them being openly questioned or perhaps ridiculed by their peers or bosses as this could make things difficult for them or may even jeopardise their careers.

I would be very surprised if further enquiries within Air Traffic Control or the airline industry would be fruitful or worthwhile but if you have the determination and time to pursue this then that is for you to decide. If you do uncover anything (bizarre or mundane) then please let me know.

I do hope this analysis is of some use to you and that you might concur with my thoughts? Thank you for taking the time to send us the sighting report and letter. Mark Easen, Investigations Coordinator BUFORA. www.bufora.org.uk

Andy Owens
By email

"A wonderful fire in the air"

I am a local historian and have been a *Fortean Times* subscriber for several years now, so having recently uncovered a historical record regarding unusual weather in my home town I thought that your publication could help me. I have found a letter from 1696 from a man named Thomas Bunham, from my home town – Leighton Buzzard on the Bedfordshire / Buckinghamshire border – to his friend in London. The transcribed contents are below:

"A STRANGE RELATION OF A WONDERFUL FIRE IN THE AIR

Seen in ENGLAND.

Is a Letter from Thomas Bunham, Esquire of the Place, to his Friend at London.

Leighton Buzzard in Buckinghamshire, May 16th. 1696.

SIR,

I Acknowledge my self to be infinitely oblig'd to you, for the frequent News you send me from the City, wherewith my Curiosity is not a little satisfi'd : I therefore could not neglect to send you the following Account of a wonderful Tempest of Rain, Fire and Thunder: I was an Eye-witness of it my self, and many others with me, so none need question the truth of it. The Relation is as follows,

On the 13th. we had here a greater Tempest of Rain, Thunder and Lightning, than has been known for a long time, especially at this time of the year, which occasioned a great Flood of Water the next day, which we fear will do considerable damage to the Meadows: but that which is most remarkable is, that just after a prodigious Clap of Thunder, in the After-noon, we perceived a long stream of Fire ; the Tail of which dragged on the Ground, and was in shape much like a Serpent ; the upper end was elevated as high as Leighton Steeple, and we could plainly discern something to work in it, as if it were in a Glass; and that part which was on the Earth made a Noise much like a Whirl-wind, and a great Smoak ascended from it, and it moved to and again, and crossed Skipton Brook, half a Mile from this Town, and the Fire prevailed, and drew up a quantity of Water with it, higher than any House, much like a Spout in the Element in the Western-Seas : And some Persons of Leighton, not being distant a Furlong from it, were terribly affrighted, as fearing some ill Consequence, and made what haste they could to avoidthe Danger. But within half an hour it began to lose its shape, and soon after disappeared, without the least Damnage.

Account of what happen'd, from,

Sir, Your most humble Servant.

THOMAS BUNHAM.

Post-script. Just as I was about to Close, I receiv'd an Account from a sure Hand, That on the 14th. (which was the next Day after what happen'd here) there was at Corby in Lincoln-shire, a great Storm of Hail, which lay a Yard thick; and some of the Stones being measured, were 5 or 6 Inches round."

I have been in contact with the Met Office Archives, who have no records for 1696, but do have records for 1697 which show huge lightning and hail storms for the area in late April and early May. The Met Office are suggesting that the letter is misdated.

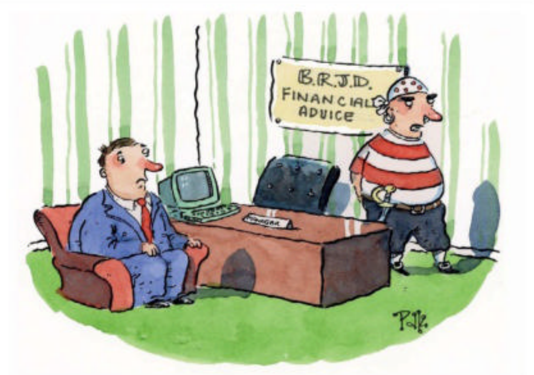
Firstly, the weather phenomenon on the face of it sounds similar (though not identical) to a fire whirl, which is a recognised, if rare phenomenon. However, fire whirls are usually caused by wildfires or firebombing: neither are likely in rural 17th century England! The second thing is the line "…and we could plainly discern something to work in it, as if it were in a Glass". What a fortean thing to say!

There are no records of a Thomas *BUNham* ever having existed locally, though there are plenty of records of a Thomas *BURNham* in Buckinghamshire during the late 17th to early 18th centuries. With spelling being largely optional back then, the author of the letter is most likely to be Thomas Burnham, rather than Thomas Bunham.

The letter also states that Leighton Buzzard is in Buckinghamshire; this is false: Leighton Buzzard is in Bedfordshire and always has been. It is however right on the county border, attached to a Bucks town called Linslade (which joined Bedfordshire itself in a boundary shift in the 1960s, merging parishes to form Leighton-Linslade). If the author was Thomas Burnham from Bucks, this perhaps explains the confusion.

I have been asked by my history society (Leighton Buzzard & District Archæological & Historical Society) to write an article for the 2026 issue of our annual publication about this letter, but I feel it would be incomplete without a better idea of what the phenomenon was and without contemplating the reference to "as if it were in a Glass". Can any FT readers help?

Matt Carroll
Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire



"Have you considered the advantages of burying your money somewhere in the Caribbean?"

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

School phantom

I have always loved a good ghost story or tale of paranormal activity. As a kid, I would borrow books from the library about the famous ghost hunters, such as Harry Price, or read the great ghost stories like Dickens's *The Signal Box,* and the works of M R James. Back then, I believed every word of the tales of Harry Price and co. Ghosts were a real and empirical certainty.

Then, as logic crept into my life, I became a definite non-believer, and then eventually an open-minded sceptic. I have always understood how the senses can play tricks on us all. The half-seen figure glimpsed from the corner of an eye, which turned out to be a passing shadow, the whisper in the ear in an empty room caused by a rustle of leaves outside an open window, the distant sound from another room interpreted as a ghostly presence, which is no more than vibrations caused by passing traffic.

The things I found hard to reconcile were the sightings of people, so real that they could be defined and described, but ethereal enough to disappear through solid walls, or, as in the case of the sightings of a Roman army in York, march past someone with only the 'body' visible above the waist, while the legs remain firmly in the Roman levels of York's streets. No logical explanation is available for this sort of thing. It must be total hooey! But then something happened to make me think again.

I worked as catering manager in a private school in South Wales, and some mornings, due to my early start and the cleaner not being there, I had to open up the school. One dark April morning, I did just that and encountered a 'person' who defied the laws of physics and shook my scepticism to its core..

I had entered the school and disarmed the alarm systems. I checked the dining room and kitchen and headed off to change into my chef's whites. The changing room was at the far end of a long corridor running through the centre of the school. On my way to change, my usual routine was to look into the staff room after switching on the first set of lights for the top end of the corridor, and check that there was milk for the teachers. As I came out of the staff room and turned to my left, I saw a tall man dressed in a long, straight coat and narrow-legged trousers walk out of a classroom on the right of the corridor and head off in the same direction as me. I instantly thought we had an intruder, so I challenged him. I thought he would either run or confront me. He did neither. He stopped, and turned to look at me over his left shoulder, his face was in darkness as was that part of the corridor at that point, then proceeded towards a locked door requiring a code to unlock it. The only other doors were to either side, easily opened but leading only into the school yard with no easy means of escape. I followed, thinking that I could apprehend the intruder at the door, but he went through it. When I reached the door, it was locked. I punched in the code and went through. Beyond were the three classrooms used by Reception, Year One and Year Two: no one was there. I checked the doors which led from each room out to the yard, and all were locked; the windows were too high up and too small for a man of that size to get through. I checked under desks and tables and even opened cupboards, which were far too small to hide in. He was nowhere to be seen.

"I saw a tall man dressed in a long coat and narrow-legged trousers"

So, what did I see? Was it an intruder who somehow managed to get away unseen? Or was it a ghost who could walk through locked doors?

There are several stories about odd occurrences within the school, clothes tugged by unseen hands, odd noises and atmospheres. None of these had concerned me or changed my scepticism. To me they could all have an explanation.

I have since asked some obvious questions about my encounter. Could someone have been in the building when I arrived? Well, I had just turned off the alarm, so if there had been an intruder, the alarm would have been sounding. Could someone have entered through an open door after I turned off the alarm? If there had been an open door, they could have, but if they did, they had to have locked it again... do burglars do that? If someone had entered after the alarm had been deactivated, where the heck did they go? The doors from the classrooms to the playground can't be locked from the outside. If they had gone out that way, the door would have had to be open when I checked them. As it stands at present, all I can do is join the ranks of those who have to say, I know what I saw, but I don't know *what it was* that I saw.

Kevin Latham
Swansea, Wales

My mother moved on

My mother died at home, aged 75, after a long battle with terminal cancer. I lived at home at the time and found her dead in bed in the morning – a hospital-type bed had been set up in the living room. After her death, I heard a number of inexplicable noises and bangs around the house. On one occasion, I heard a very loud bang from upstairs and thinking that I had left the landing room window open and a gust of wind had caught it and knocked over a large vase which sat on the windowsill, went up to check. I found the window closed, the vase fine.

This went on for a few weeks and I tried to brush it off and explain it away. Then one morning I distinctly heard my mother call my name. I went cold for a second then pulled myself together. Pretty unnerving really.

This all came to an end after

I had a dream in which I saw my mother, who looked fit and well, with dark hair, aged about 45, in the road outside the house. I saw her pick up a front door key to the house, approach the door and furiously try to get in, the key not working or turning in the lock. Then I saw a look of surprise on her face as she realised she was dead and wasn't supposed to be there. She turned on her heel and walked away out of sight. As a devout Christian I am sure she had simply moved on; in fact I sensed relief from her that she was no longer alive. After that the house felt calmer and no more loud noises or bangs were heard again.

I am sure that these sorts of experiences are fairly common to the extent they are often not reported and only discussed informally.

Nick Smith
Tring, Hertfordshire

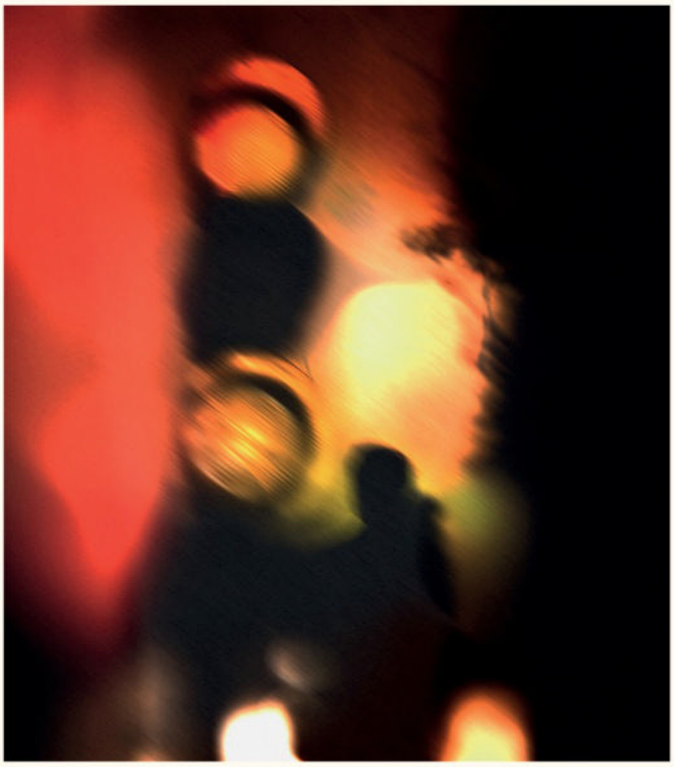
Duvet mystery

This is a follow-up to a previous IHTM letter, "Who Turned the Duvet" [**FT437:67**]. To recap, my partner, who was working long shifts as a staff nurse, came back home after a shift, retired to bed after a quick dinner, only to find her duvet turned down at the corner; neither myself nor she had done this, and it became an anecdote we recounted over the years.

The same thing happened again last night. Circumstances have changed; my partner stopped working over 10 years ago, to look after her elderly mother. Her mother sadly passed away in February, after a long illness. Last night, my partner was again retiring to bed early, as she had an early rise the next morning, to help our daughter-in-law look after our new baby granddaughter, who was born two days after my partner's mum passed away.

As she was up early, my partner was sleeping in the back room, to avoid my somewhat loud snoring. She said goodnight and went upstairs, then almost immediately called on me to ask if I had turned her duvet down. The duvet on the bed in the back room was again turned down at the corner. Neither of us had turned it down.

Last night was the night before my partner's birthday, her first birthday since her mum had passed away.



"Regularly, one streetlight would switch off when I was within 30-40 feet of it"

A simple thing like turning down a duvet is almost too prosaic and mundane to be given a second thought, but becomes striking when it occurs in a house with only two occupants, both of whom were downstairs in the living room when it happened.

So, this is not just an "It Happened to Me", but an "It Happened to Me – Again".

Stan Sweeney
Lanarkshire

Streetlight Weirdness

"Ghostwatch" [**FT458:16-18**] which mentions "The alleged ability of some people consciously to affect streetlights" [see **FT273:52-55**] – caused me to recall a series of very similar incidents that happened to me whilst walking home through my very old village in South Wirral in the early/mid 1980s. Except, this wasn't a situation, overall, where I was conscious of altering the streetlight – it seemed to be playing with me!

Regularly, but importantly, at random times – albeit within a time window of approximately 2am-4am – one streetlight, of an older style (actually atop a wooden post if memory serves me) would switch off when I was within about 30-40ft (9-12m) of it!

I was always approaching after a night out at friends/the pubs of the nearest town (Neston), and was often "a gentleman in his cups", but usually very aware of such things as a sudden blinking off of one of the very few streetlights in this small village main street.

To my recall, it never happened if I approached from the other direction, which would be from my parents' house further up and almost out of the village, which didn't happen very often anyway for one reason or another.

I remember – vividly – deliberately stopping quite a few times, and looking at it and silently saying "Stay on, will you! Just this once!" and stopping in my tracks.

Nothing ever happened… until I started walking again, then, pow! It would blink off!

It was never any other streetlight, of any type, and it didn't matter what time it might be, 9 times out of 10, it would blink off as I approached, but sometimes I would almost be upon it before it "noticed" me, then, again *blink!* and it was off, leaving just a rapidly fading glow inside the glass. I wonder why, that one time out of 10, it didn't! I even turned round on those rare occasions, once I'd walked about 30 or so feet past it to see if it blinked off, but no.

If anyone is interested in maybe trying to experience the same effect, it is (or was, I haven't been back for some years now) in the village of Burton on the Wirral, outside Bishop Wilson's Cottage, and opposite the wide entrance area to what used to be Burton Manor, which is now a book repository for Liverpool University, or so I am led to understand .

Incidentally, Burton was the birthplace of the radio DJ and personality John Peel. His real surname was Ravenscroft.

Mark Pearson
By email

Editor's note: For a publication on this phenomenon, see *Sliders: the Enigma of Streetlight Interference* (1993) by Hilary Evans.

Imaginary spiders

Regarding the hypnagogic/hypnopompic hallucinations mentioned in 'It Happened to Me…' [**FT459:65**] regarding spiders, I'd just like to add my experience. When I was about 25 years old, I woke one night to see a huge spider dangling from some web just above my head. I jumped out of bed and turned on the lights to better see where it was, but when I turned back around, I couldn't see it anywhere. The room was sparsely furnished, and the spider was so huge that there were few places to hide. I spent quite some time trying to find it with no luck.

I eventually realised it must have been an hallucination as it had nothing of the quality of a dream and the spider itself was too big to be hiding anywhere. This spider hallucination happened on numerous occasions over a span of about 10 years, always hypnagogic, and I realised the spiders were always 'wrong' somehow – too many legs, too big, like nothing we have here in Australia. After that first time I was never frightened and I'm not normally afraid of spiders anyway.

Prior to this I had been experiencing hypnopompic hallucinations since I was a teenager, but they were always nice. They usually consisted of colourful shapes or words I could never read. As mentioned in Tom Vanheems's letter, I also was convinced if I could ever read those words, they would tell me something meaningful.

Danielle Clifford
By email

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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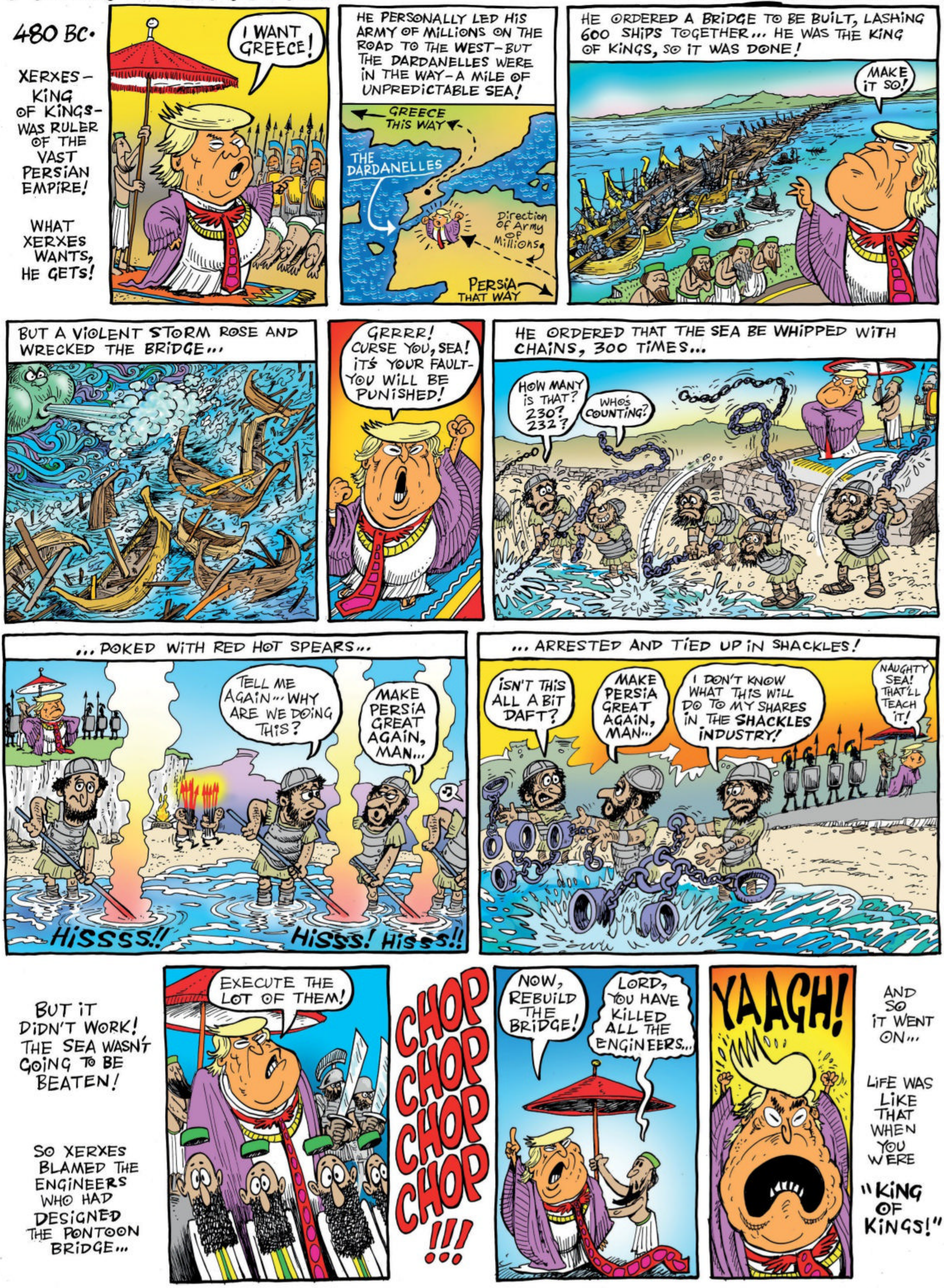
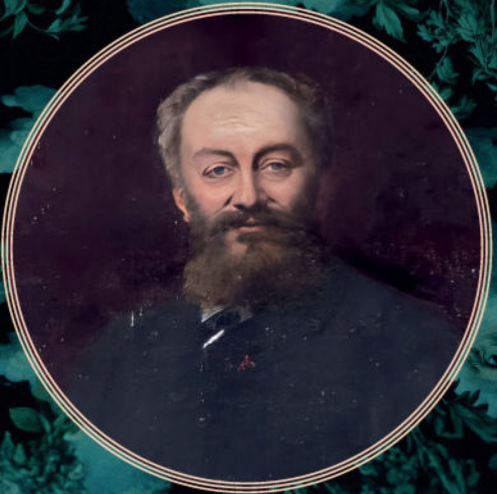
PHENOMENOMIX

XERXES

HUNT EMERSON with ROB GANDY


480 BC·
XERXES – KING OF KINGS – WAS RULER OF THE VAST PERSIAN EMPIRE!
WHAT XERXES WANTS, HE GETS!
I WANT GREECE!
HE PERSONALLY LED HIS ARMY OF MILLIONS ON THE ROAD TO THE WEST – BUT THE DARDANELLES WERE IN THE WAY – A MILE OF UNPREDICTABLE SEA!
GREECE THIS WAY
THE DARDANELLES
Direction of Army of Millions
PERSIA THAT WAY
HE ORDERED A BRIDGE TO BE BUILT, LASHING 600 SHIPS TOGETHER... HE WAS THE KING OF KINGS, SO IT WAS DONE!
MAKE IT SO!
BUT A VIOLENT STORM ROSE AND WRECKED THE BRIDGE...
GRRRR! CURSE YOU, SEA! IT'S YOUR FAULT – YOU WILL BE PUNISHED!
HE ORDERED THAT THE SEA BE WHIPPED WITH CHAINS, 300 TIMES...
HOW MANY IS THAT? 230? 232?
WHO'S COUNTING?
... POKED WITH RED HOT SPEARS...
TELL ME AGAIN... WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?
MAKE PERSIA GREAT AGAIN, MAN...
HISSSS!! HISSS! HISSS!!
... ARRESTED AND TIED UP IN SHACKLES!
ISN'T THIS ALL A BIT DAFT?
MAKE PERSIA GREAT AGAIN, MAN...
I DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS WILL DO TO MY SHARES IN THE SHACKLES INDUSTRY!
NAUGHTY SEA! THAT'LL TEACH IT!
BUT IT DIDN'T WORK! THE SEA WASN'T GOING TO BE BEATEN!
SO XERXES BLAMED THE ENGINEERS WHO HAD DESIGNED THE PONTOON BRIDGE...
EXECUTE THE LOT OF THEM!
CHOP CHOP CHOP CHOP !!!
NOW, REBUILD THE BRIDGE!
LORD, YOU HAVE KILLED ALL THE ENGINEERS...
YAAGH!
AND SO IT WENT ON...
LIFE WAS LIKE THAT WHEN YOU WERE "KING OF KINGS!"

COMING NEXT MONTH



EMPEROR OF THE NIGHT

THE MAN WHO INVENTED LUCID DREAMING

CARRY ON UP THE JUNGLE

COLONEL FAWCETT AND HIS MYSTERY BEASTS

+ GREEK DREAM TEMPLES, MASONIC SUPERMARIO, FORTEAN TV UNCUT, AND MUCH MORE...

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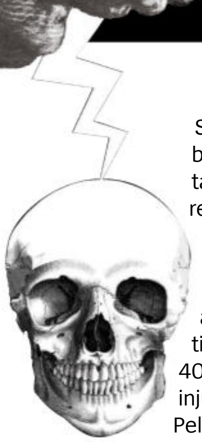
ON SALE 30 OCT 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



An unnamed 29-year-old female employee collapsed and died in the cryotherapy suite of the On Air gym in Paris, France, after nitrogen gas leaked from a cold chamber used to help top-level athletes relieve muscle injury, pain and inflammation, and to increase blood circulation. Nitrogen liquifies at minus 196 degrees, and is commonly used in medical treatments requiring extreme cold, but if the temperature rises, it evaporates into a colourless, odourless gas. As nitrogen makes up 70 per cent of the air we breathe, it is normally harmless, but when evaporating nitrogen displaces all the air in an enclosed space, it forces out the oxygen, suffocating anyone in the room, which is what happened in this case. A second woman, aged 34, survived, despite also being in cardiorespiratory arrest when the emergency services arrived, and three people who attempted to help the women were also taken to hospital with symptoms of respiratory distress. *theguardian.com, 15 Apr 2025.*

A man visiting his 39-year-old ex-wife in Belgrade, Serbia, called police after he found her dead on her living room couch. She was lying on her left side with her body covered by a blanket, and when officers removed this, she was found to be naked from the waist down; there was also a kitchen whisk protruding from her anus. Its wooden handle had been inserted into her rectum to a depth of about 4 inches (10cm) and was being used as "a dildo-like object", according to the coroner. The woman was known to suffer from high blood pressure, and the autopsy revealed the cause of death to be a brain hæmorrhage resulting from a burst aneurysm, a bulge on one of the blood vessels. This disrupts the flow of blood and oxygen to the brain and swiftly leads to unconsciousness and death. It is believed that the woman was using the kitchen tool for anal stimulation while masturbating, and that sexual excitement and orgasm caused her blood pressure to spike, rupturing the aneurysm and causing her death. Only 0.15 percent of deaths are linked to sex, and most of these are men dying from heart failure shortly after sex with a much younger woman. This is the first reported death of a woman during anal self-stimulation. *livescience.com, 9 Jul 2025.*

On 12 September 2023 a Piper Super Cub light aircraft flown by Eugene Peltola Jr crashed on take-off from an airstrip near the remote community of St Mary's in western Alaska. Peltola was seriously hurt in the impact, but could not be reached by appropriate medical assistance in time as the nearest hospital was 400 miles away; he died from his injuries shortly afterwards.

Peltola had been on a hunting trip with several other men during which they had killed a large moose and he was using the plane to transport the meat from their kill. A National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation into the incident determined that Peltola had piled the plane with 150lb of meat, but had not weighed it to check that he was within the aircraft's carrying capacity, nor had he secured it properly. "The meat was strapped into the rear passenger seat area with both the seatbelt and rope and was loaded into the airplane's belly pod, which did not have tie-down provisions," said the report. Peltola had further compromised the plane's airworthiness by tying the moose's antlers to the plane's right wing strut, creating what the report described as "parasitic drag" that unbalanced the aircraft. He then attempted take-off when there was considerable wind turbulence over the airstrip.

"If you would have been able to take one of those items out, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation. But those things all in combination led to this tragic accident," said NTSB Alaska Region Chief Clint Johnson. *cbsnews.com, 23 Jul 2025.*

To celebrate leaving home to start a new life with his girlfriend on the Gold Coast in Australia, Sonny Blundell, 18, performed an energetic backflip on Southport beach, during which he struck his head on a nearby object. He retired to bed with a headache, but did not think he had injured himself seriously. However, he then suffered vomiting and lost consciousness, and a friend discovered him unresponsive in bed the next morning. Rushed to hospital, it was found that he had suffered "multiple strokes" and developed a brain bleed that needed a surgical drain. Despite brain surgery and being placed in a medically induced coma, Blundell died six days later. *express.co.uk, 3 Jul 2025.*

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